

**w 49**

**a magazine of award-winning poetry and prose**

**volume 21**

## Editorial

Welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> edition of the Langara College English department's *W49*, a journal of award-winning creative writing by Langara students. It takes a village to raise a literary journal, and so a huge thank you to all the village people without whom this edition would not have been possible.

I would like to thank the English department's esteemed panel of adjudicators— Peter Babiak, Deborah Blacklock, Sandra Friesen, Jill Goldberg, Caroline Harvey, Trevor Newland, Thor Polukoshko, Daniel Poirier, Sarah Richards, Erin Robb, and Roger Semmens – for their dedication and expertise, and for their enthusiasm. Invaluable assistance in seeing the project through to completion under unusual circumstances was further provided by Greg Holditch, Amanda Jordan, Kathleen Oliver, and Katie McCallum.

Most importantly, I would like to thank all *W49* contributors, the Langara students whose talent and creativity is on full display in this year's edition. The level of competition in this writing contest is consistently high, and this year, in this regard at least, is no exception; in the poetry category, for example, five different first place winners were chosen by five separate judges, so that a points ranking system needed to be applied to determine final positions (and no, Roger didn't get two votes). This necessity speaks clearly to the level of the writing submitted to us by Langara's students, which extended equally to the fiction and creative nonfiction categories. We are also pleased to include, as per tradition, more Langara student writing excellence in the form of winning entries from Caroline Harvey's Postcard Contest competition.

Regretfully, due to covid-related repercussions, this year's edition of *W49* will appear online only, though for 2022 the hope is to be able to revert to a print-based edition that will also appear online. And so for now, readers are invited to enjoy these selections and celebrate another edition of writing excellence from the students of Langara College.

*Guy Wilkinson*

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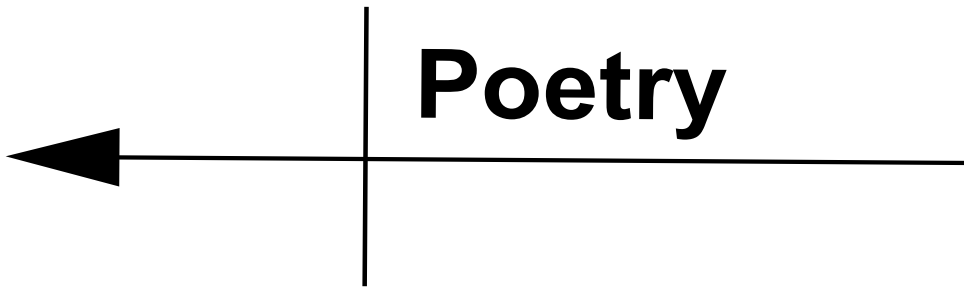
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Are we stars still?

we dig into the earth together  
spoon and trowel  
you pick up a seed  
between thumb and forefinger  
playfully pressing it to my forehead  
my hands envelop your tiny ones  
gently grasping for my cheeks now  
pulling me down towards you

and we fall  
backwards into the earth  
we fall into darkness  
down  
out of forgetfulness  
into abstraction  
beneath the cradle of roots  
that twist through my hair

where earth  
turns into clay  
and my limbs, remembering  
origins, crumble  
where we tumble from clay  
into sand  
sand slowly transforms into stars  
and shafts of light pierce the darkness

I am scattered like shattered glass;  
from a deeply held breath exhaled  
across the Vast  
and I do not want to return  
I do not want to be put back whole again  
And you whisper-are we stars still?

by Xochitl Leal

## A space I hold for no one but me

For a while, I had forgotten  
what people meant  
when they say they feel  
trapped at home,

a space I hold for no one but me

Witches fly to their sabbath  
I too, dance mostly naked  
to where my coffee is

a space that has no one but me

Nobody tells me when to sleep and nobody  
tells me goodnight

by Suki Lam

# KODOKUSHI

An elderly woman was found two weeks dead in her home near Galway today.

Saoirse Whelan, seventy-two, was a single child and widow of forty-eight years, who had no children and is succeeded by no family members.

Locals were shocked to hear of the sudden, silent passing of a fixture of the rural Derryland North community.

“No one knew her well,” said Martin Maher, a neighbour, “But we all knew her. I think she had thought of all of us, she had seen all of us, at least somewhat as friends.”

Mrs Whelan is perhaps best known for her career as a horticulturalist with a fondness for vines. Obscure now, her designs were chosen for “We Shall Not Forget”, a 1983 initiative, and remain in use in local graveyards.

“There’s so much I wish we could have made more clear,” Mr Maher said. “But, to put it simply, the fact we didn’t know is no excuse. I want to tell her that people really cared. An ode, I guess. To say she will not be forgotten.”

A woman was found dead in her home today.

She was a widow of forty-eight years, who had no children and no family.

Locals heard in passing of her Death.

“No one knew her,” said a neighbour, “But we all thought she had at least some friends.”

She is perhaps known for her career and vines. Obscure now, her designs We Shall Forget, in local graveyards.

“There’s so much we could have made more clear,” he said. “But, to put it simply, we didn’t really care. An ode, I guess. To say she will be forgotten.”

A woman died with

no family

or

friends.

vines Obscure her grave.

her memor ode s. she will be forgot.

by Malcolm Svensson



Four Holes and Seven Days Ago  
(Dry Socket)

If children  
are reason  
to clamber up  
out of my bed  
leaving an empty  
aching cavity  
in my place  
then  
when I am at once out of urine,  
I am infecund.

If it is no longer for the sake of micturition,  
my extraction  
of self from bed  
is now only,  
and agonizingly apparently only,  
for the pain in the place of an absent tooth  
a hollow crater

in a swollen moon.

My upset has  
my despondency  
in a headlock  
abstraction causing abstraction;  
tooth from mouth  
                    woman from logic

a war  
waged for  
relief;  
my inconceivable drowsing  
or elusive daylight rousing  
dogs  
that rouse dentists  
that might pump me  
full of meds.

by Kate Cunningham

## Alchemists

I lay beneath the dry leaves of autumn  
in the path amongst the trees  
the ground trembles with the coming of horses  
nostrils flare and exhale  
a hoof rises and falls  
on brittle bones underfoot

I will lay like broken twigs  
under the rot of leaves, on damp earth  
I will absorb the bleeding colours of spring  
I will lay under a blanket of cast-off blossoms as trees disrobe in the winds  
and rain will collect  
in pools filling my crevices  
overflowing indentations where creatures will come to gather and feed  
rains will fall  
and wash away the impurities of memory  
cleanse the residues of regret  
they will carve out pathways and pilgrimage routes in my skull  
for ants to tread in deep contemplation  
beetles will build their temples in my collarbone  
flowers will shrink with frailty becoming thin veins of a forgotten summer  
then winds will blow colder  
freezing the earth  
freezing the rain  
and I will lay under the weight of snow  
under the silent frost  
until warm breezes cover me with laughter again  
and the running of small feet  
laughter that melts the last of the ice  
as it runs like rivers trickling into the empty cavities,  
into empty sockets  
little fingers will brush aside the leaves  
will snatch up these gleaming white bones  
bleached bones that reflect the golden rays of a child's eyes  
they will layout out these fragments of a memory  
they will grind with stones on a stone  
until they are nothing but dust and they will mix this with berries, with leaves  
they will mix a paste, an ointment, a paint,  
discovering a new, unknown hue  
little fingers will dip into this alchemy and anoint the trees  
they will hallow their hollows  
sanctify the grove and confer the moor

with the promise of the coming of horses

by Xochitl Leal

## The Most Magical Place on Earth

I shed my June skin  
in July,  
shoulders red  
as the desert on film  
beneath my first ever bra straps;  
eleven years of safety in wonder  
picked and peeled at  
torn away by  
newly insecure fingers  
to reveal freckles  
darkened  
from the scorching.

Had I been a serpent  
(a limbless creeping thing)  
this would have been fine.

Ducks here are  
unable to properly spread their weight  
through palmate feet  
grating on concrete  
each step they take  
expectant of a pond  
or a small patch of grass.

And ducks here are  
six-foot tall  
sweating teenagers  
undercover  
in blue sailor uniforms  
hands where wings should be  
mesh where eyes should be.

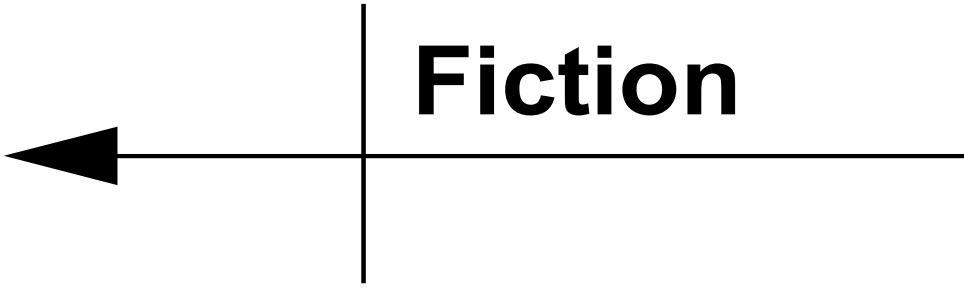
I am the sound waves  
of duck beseeching duck  
to help him find a way out;  
sound waves  
you can see  
tremble  
in Floridian heat;  
sound waves

you cannot hear  
for the rumble  
of rollercoaster lift-chains  
click click clicking  
and echoed screams  
bouncing off of Lake Buena Vista  
to Bay Lake  
and back again  
deafening.

I am crying out  
for a haven  
from *fireworks* at night

and *fireworks* at night are  
a bombastic sleight of hand  
while the magician steals your wallet.

by Kate Cunningham



## Not a Fan

They were still in university, so when Amos asked Caroline to show him her world she just took him into her bedroom. Amos wondered how anyone got to know her outside of these four walls, covered in posters. They weren't posters of movies that Amos had seen, but they were movies he'd known. They were posters of movies that were hung up in rooms of people like Caroline and, up until this point, doors to those rooms had always been shut to people like Amos. Yet when the door finally opened and all was revealed, he was somehow unsurprised that each movie she had proudly displayed was directed by Quentin Tarantino.

Pulp Fiction was the first one she showed him. They sat thigh to thigh on her bed, her computer resting half and half on each of their laps. Ten minutes in, he realized that he could see her reflection in the screen; he missed most of the movie. He found watching her jaw tense and relax, her lips purse and then slack open, to be much more fascinating than the splashes of blood and racism causing them to. I could tell you what Caroline looked like; that her hair was short and brown and that her face appeared to be perfectly centred on her head, but this seems altogether irrelevant as Amos hardly even noticed. He only noticed that when he looked into her eyes, this cluttered bedroom they were in kaleidoscoped to reveal her eyes again, and then the bedroom again, obscuring who she was with the colours and textures of what she was made of and how she appeared. But because the room was covered in Tarantino posters, you can see why this was confusing for Amos.

Each week after that, Caroline showed him another Tarantino movie, always at her place, surrounded by these posters. For ten weeks he tried to learn about Caroline through Tarantino's fucks, shits and ass-goddamns, sure that to know one was to know the other, but by week four he still couldn't understand what she so liked about these movies.

They'd met at Amos' birthday party which had one simple instruction: *come dressed as me*. Being the plus one of Amos' friend, Inaya, Caroline didn't know about the theme of the party until an hour before. She and Inaya had downed a few shots of vodka already when Inaya remembered to show Caroline a photo of Amos. All Caroline saw was his nose ring and she immediately grabbed an ice cube and a sewing needle and did what had to be done.

With her bright red, scabby nose, she walked right up to Amos and said,  
“Hey, I'm Amos.”

Inaya left early that night and Caroline became an orphan. That's when she and Amos buddied up. That's when they invented the game. The goal of the game was simple: *make up the most unbelievable How We Met story while still having everyone at a party believe it.*

"What do you get if you win?" Amos had asked, to which Caroline had replied,

"There is no winner. It's not a game like that." Amos quickly learned that she'd only said that because she knew she'd be winning. He wasn't sure how she knew, but when she started an HWM with:

"Well, I was working as a waitress in a cocktail bar, that much is true..." and nobody flinched, he saw it clear as day. And when she invited him to a Reservoir Dogs watch party at her house on week 3 of their relationship, he realized that, in fact, there were other games that they were playing on top of this one *all the time...* and Caroline was winning *all of them.*

"Do you go to UBC?" Amos was asked by each one of Caroline's friends at different times throughout the night. He didn't feel guilty saying no until the fourth time he was met with that same, "Oh. So what do you...do?" Filtering through the truth in his head to figure out which version of the story would satiate those wanting looks on their faces, he mostly went with something about credits and something about transferring. I could tell you exactly what he told them, but what matters is that their faces were always left wanting and so Amos was too.

He waded through the pods of toqued arts students discussing the best vegan burrito and Judith Butler, responding to as many questions as he could with, "I actually don't know a lot about that. Tell me everything you know," but if he'd said that every time he didn't know something, they'd never have gotten around to watching the movie. He didn't want to be dishonest but eventually he gave in to smiling and nodding. This surrender came sometime after he'd said,

"...and when the girl said their name, she really botched it! I said 'by who?'" and Caroline breathed out,

"Whom," like a focused chant; a mantra she'd repeated daily for some time. She'd corrected his grammar before, but it wasn't until then, when his guard had been hammered down by questions about his favourite Phoebe Bridgers song that "people just don't talk about," that he'd really noticed that with each correction, he hung his head a little bit more. He wondered, then, how straight he'd been standing before he met Caroline at all. He was right to wonder, but he was wrong to assume that it was all that straight. Maybe when he was growing up; when

Lucky Charms were breakfast and McDonald's and a movie were a treat. They were special because he was told that they were, and for \$5 his day could be made. But something happens when a first year English prof teaches hedonism through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Something happens when a vegetarian from that English class shows you a documentary on factory farming. Something happens when you leave the suburbs and you realize that your special day is actually quite accessible, is also quite harmful, and that some people have known this since they were small. Something happens when your world expands. You shrink. You shrink and you shrink and you bow your head just a little bit more than you did before. All of your comforts are not virtuous and all of your virtues are not attainable unless you're someone like Caroline and her friends.

But Amos was there *with* Caroline and her friends. He was louder, more confused, and speaking incorrectly, but he was there. Why was he there? He wanted to be there. Right? Or he had been convinced by capitalism that he wanted to be there. Or it was in the name of love. At some point, he landed on this:

It was because when his mom came to visit him, all he could talk about was Quentin Tarantino.

"It's something about his dialogue," he'd said to her. They were sitting in a booth in an Irish pub. "Ah, you just have to watch. The dialogue is quick, it's clever. It's not all that realistic, but it's giving you these little revelations, bit by bit, you know?"

She didn't know. Maybe he knew, but maybe he didn't. I mean, I know Amos, but if you lie to yourself for long enough you can convince any omniscient narrator that that's the truth.

As they stood to leave, she said,

"Remember that you're young, Amos."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It just means that you might forget where you came from if you're always a guest. Stay true to yourself." Amos scoffed and started for the exit. He was halfway out the door when his mom stopped in front of an easel wearing an advertisement for a free vacation. Below it was a pad of paper and a ballot box. She raised her eyebrows at Amos with a smile and ripped off two entry slips. With an eye roll, Amos let go of the door to fill out his name with his mom and slip it into the box.

"What about losing myself if I'm always a guest?" he asked.



“You can be more at home in a foreign country than in your own city, Amos. *That’s* staying true to yourself.”

His mom went back to Lethbridge the next day and he went back to Caroline’s.

Amos ordered the masks on week five. One Tarantino and one Vincent Vega. He had them shipped straight to Caroline’s address because they never spent any time at his place. When he came over that night Caroline left him waiting outside the apartment building for seven minutes before buzzing him in. She apologized for forgetting what time he was coming over, not mentioning the Amazon box on the counter.

“I can’t believe you didn’t open it,” Amos said.

“I’ve had such a busy day,” Caroline responded, as if he would never understand, being a part-time student. “You can open it.”

“I don’t want to,” Amos said. “It’s for you. It’s a gift.” She paused and smiled at him skeptically.

“A gift, huh?”

“*Two* gifts!” He wanted her to inhale sharply, excitedly, filling her head with air so her eyes would swell like balloons. He wanted her to put one of the masks on and say to him,

“Mr. Vincent Vega,” with that Mia Wallace drawl while handing him the one with John Travolta’s face printed on it. He wanted her to insist that they wear them right now. Instead she said,

“Two gifts from Jeff Bezos himself? I thought he was too busy taking advantage of minorities to give out free stuff.”

*Oh god*, Amos thought. *Can I take it back? I take it back. Don’t open it.* His fingers began to itch as she peeled off the tape and reached inside. She held the costume pieces in her hands and exhaled. I could say that she exhaled a laugh, as this is what she was trying to do so she wouldn’t make Amos feel bad, but it isn’t what she did. The laugh was not noticeable and she did make Amos feel bad.

“That’s pretty funny,” she said.

“They’re stupid. I know. I just thought—”

“I like them. They’re funny.” It was then, as she put the masks back into the box, that Amos decided to lay his blade down. He’d been trying so hard to pull off a sneak attack, setting

aside copious amounts of time to tear into clips or articles about the Tarantino mystique, making a concerted effort to find out what he was missing. But each attempt and failure to understand what he wasn't understanding was as heavy as a grammar correction, or an "Oh, so what school *do* you go to?" He was so tired of being on the offense that he decided, then, to relax into submission and wait for Tarantino to sneak up on *him*. He would forget everything he thought he knew about the grindhouse director and come to Caroline's house defenseless and clear headed.

Of course this was impossible. Caroline put on *Django: Unchained* and as soon as the first racial slur was screamed, Amos remembered that this was for members of a club that he did not belong to. But what was so great about this club, anyway? *Caroline*, he reminded himself. *Caroline is great*. Isn't she?

Inaya threw a party on Valentine's Day and made everyone play a game with this simple prompt: *They're perfect, but...*

"They voted for Donald Trump," someone said.

"They only listen to Paul Brandt!"

"They wear a dinosaur costume to every party you take them to—even your wedding!"

Theoretically, you state your case for why or why not you'd still date them and, *voilà*. Friendly debate ensues. But this simple thread got caught on something in Amos' brain. It got caught on a cardboard cutout of Quentin Tarantino that was constantly sticking out of a box he'd tried to pack up and shove away into the deepest, darkest annals of his memory.

"But then they're not perfect, right?" he said, too loudly. It was too loud because conversation ceased and Inaya's face dropped.

"What?" she said. "That's the point. They're perfect, *but*."

"Right, but if there's a 'but' then they're not perfect and the game means nothing."

"But they're perfect in every other way. It's a hypothetical, it doesn't matter if it's possible. And it doesn't have to mean anything, it's just a game."

"They're perfect, but they overthink games," someone said. Caroline laughed. I could say that she snorted, as this is what she was trying to do so she wouldn't make Amos feel bad, but it isn't what she did. The laugh was noticeable and she did make Amos feel bad. He straightened in his seat and said,

"If the person is perfect but they wear a dinosaur costume to every party you take them to then there must be some deeper, inherent difference between the two of you, and everything that

seems perfect about them isn't gonna seem so perfect when that difference rears its ugly head! Surely somewhere deep down, the roots of the things that seem perfect are connected to the roots of their love of dinosaur costumes. The only 'but' that's remotely possible would be 'they're perfect, but they're actually not.'" Amos' outburst was punctuated by a vibration in his back pocket. He excused himself from the room and checked his phone on the back porch.

I hasten to tell you what happened next simply because I fear you will not believe me. What happened next is either the whole truth and nothing but, or a lie told so continually that even I, an omniscient narrator, have been convinced of.

Amos had one new voicemail.

"Hi there, my name is Edie, I'm calling from Extralux Vacations for Amos Scott. You entered our 'trip for two' draw about two months ago and I'm pleased to tell you that you are our winner! Please call us back within 24 hours to claim your weekend getaway for two to the Canary Islands from March 13 to the 15th. You can reach us at..."

Amos dropped his arm and let out a laugh. Just then, the back door slid open and Caroline came out onto the porch. He thought that she might be angry with him. He thought that she might ask him what the hell that was all about in there, but she had the same stunned look on her face that he did.

"Are we freaking out or are we freaking *out*?" she asked. Amos' face fell into a smushed wrinkle of confusion.

"You heard?"

"Um, fuck yeah! You heard?"

"About the Canary Islands?"

"About the convention! Why, what happened in the Canary Islands?"

"Nothing...what convention?"

"The comic book convention! Quentin *fucking* Tarantino is coming to *our* fucking city! Can you believe it? I legitimately cannot believe it. March 13th, baby, are you in or are you *in*?" She was holding onto Amos' shoulders then, her eyes all ballooned out like he'd been waiting for.

"March 13th, huh?"

"One day only! And the VIP meet and greet's not even that expensive. Should we wear our Tarantino masks?"

“What?”

“The masks! The masks that you bought, we should wear them!”

“Oh. Yeah...um...the Canary Islands, um...they...”

“Oh, right! What’s that all about?”

“I won this free vacation to the Canary Islands.”

“Shit, what? This is the best night of our lives!”

“Uh-huh. But it...well, once I call back they automatically book it for March 13th.”

Caroline’s smile flattened, but her eyes stayed bulged.

“Well, fuck, huh?”

“Yeah, fuck.”

“Maybe Inaya would want to go with you.”

“What?”

“To the Canary Islands. Ask Inaya. Or your mom.”

“Are you being serious right now?” They were standing face to face, but on parallel planes, like two dogs frozen in place mid-brawl, waiting for the other to make the next move. The blade Amos had laid down so peacefully was trembling against the porch, he could hear it. It was being pulled towards him by some ethereal force he couldn’t name.

“Of course I’m being serious. What do you mean? I’m not...I can’t miss meeting Tarantino.”

“Well I can’t go to the Canary Islands with my mom, so...”

“Why not?”

“Because I want to go with you! You’re my girlfriend and it’s a trip for two to the fucking Canary Islands!” Caroline pressed her lips into a smile again and tried to level with him.

“Why don’t you just come to the convention with me? We’ll save up and take a trip together another time.” I could tell you that she really did want this. Her narrowed eyebrows were pleading, not defending. Her big balloon eyes were full of hope and excitement, not judgement and resentment. But what good would telling you do? It’s not like Amos knew the difference. You know, if you lie to yourself about something for long enough...

“Un-fucking-believable. No, you know what? That’s the worst *part*. I *can* believe this! I should have seen this coming from the very beginning. They’re perfect, but, right? That’s it, isn’t it? You’re so perfect, but you’re not. You’ve got the right posters, your family’s got the right

degrees, and you've got the right affinity for shitty, boring, racist movies, but you hate that I don't have any of that, don't you? You don't get what I don't get about Quentin  *fucking*  Tarantino. And I don't get it, either! I don't! I really, really don't. You have no idea how much I wish that I did, but I don't, and I don't even know why I wish that I did.

"I'm  *glad*  I'd rather spend a weekend in the Canary Islands with my girlfriend than meet some mystical idol I don't know that doesn't give a shit about me. You know, you can be more at home in a foreign country than you can in your own city. He's not gonna give a shit about you, you know that right? And you know that I do, right? And—"

"Do you?"

"Yes! Clearly, I do."

"You think I'm pretentious."

"You are."

"You think I resent you because your parents didn't go to the right university."

"You do. Because maybe if they had then I'd understand your strange fascination with those brutal movies!"

"I think  *you*  resent you because your parents didn't go to the right university, Amos."

"Oh, please."

"But, you know what? There's no trick. There's no prerequisite for liking Tarantino movies. They're movies. You like them or you don't."

"I don't even know what I'm supposed to say to that. I don't even know why we're having this conversation!"

"You're having an identity crisis!"

"If I'm having an identity crisis it's because you're supposed to be my partner and you don't even care! When was the last time you came to my house? When?"

"My place is bigger! You have five roommates! We can spend more time at your place, that was never on purpose."

"Yeah, but that's the thing. It was by  *design* . Your mom pays your rent so you get to live in the bigger place with less roommates. Sure, we hang out there because it's a nicer space, but the very reason you live in a nicer space is why...why I..." Caroline cracked a smile, shook her fist and finished his sentence,

"Why I oughta..."

They could have both let out a laugh. Amos could have realized how tightly he was holding that imaginary sword and rested it back down. He could have told Caroline that he was young and that he would forget where he came from if he was always a guest. She could have offered to stay at his place that night and he could have declined after all because, well, he really *did* have a lot of roommates. I'm not saying that they *should* have, I'm simply saying that they *could* have. I'm simply telling you what you want to hear because you're not going to believe what really happened. I fear, though, that I am obligated to tell you the truth—what I know to be the truth. It's the omniscient narrator's burden: to be all-knowing is to be all-telling. I am obligated to tell you that Amos scoffed at Caroline one last time.

"I'm done with this right now. Hey, when you meet the guy, why don't you invite him to dinner?" he said. "I'd love to be your third wheel. Maybe he can tell me what the fuck is so great about his movies and we can cutely argue about tipping waitresses." He propelled himself down the stairs, falling more heavily with each step, and found his way out of the backyard, to the bus stop across the street. He went home and watched Tarantino movies until sleep itself stung his eyes. Sleep, which came to him two thirds into *Inglourious Basterds*, sent him into a delirious fever dream of flicked cigarettes and fire. Film and fire. Flicked cigarette, Tarantino, fire, flick Nazi, scalp, fire, Tarantino fire. Caroline's face swirled into Tarantino's 2D likeness, with holes where eyes should have been, before distorting into Brad Pitt and Uma Thurman, a bloody kaleidoscope taking him over. Flick, cigarette, fire.

Because they'd stopped seeing each other, Amos ordered 1200 feet of 35mm nitrate film to his own address over three weeks prior to March 13th. There was no room for the film canisters in his room, so they slept with him in his twin bed, cold and lumpy. He thought that it was nice, having blank film next to him while he slept, like maybe he'd wake up one morning and have movies of his dreams.

Oddly, it was purchasing the pack of cigarettes that made him the most uncomfortable. Only then did he stop and wonder if this was all such a good idea. His mother had struggled to quit smoking for three years when he was younger, regardless of how many times he'd hide her smokes in the dishwasher before she ran it. She was quitting for him, she'd told him. Her smoking could kill either of them and she'd miss him too much no matter which one of them died. He thought that this was something he had. He knew that big tobacco was an evil industry that he would staunchly boycott for the greater good. This was a principle he had and it was

based on things that he knew. But every vegan, cyclist, English student he'd met since he'd been dating Caroline was also a smoker.

Amos bought a pack and stole a book of matches from Caroline's bathroom on March 12th just before:

Amos sat at the island in the kitchen, Caroline standing across from him, leaning the heels of her hands against the edge of the counter. After one entire minute of communicating through aspirations and eyebrows, Caroline said,

"Did you find someone to go on the trip with you?"

"No."

"Are you gonna go alone?"

"I don't know yet."

"Are we breaking up?"

"That's not entirely up to me."

"And if it were?"

Caroline lifted her hands from the counter and crossed her arms.

"I know you like me, Amos. I'm pretty sure you love me. But what's that worth if I make you hate yourself?" It was a simple enough thought, but the thread got caught in his brain, on something new this time. It got caught on something amorphous. Something unnamed. Something more familiar to him than Tarantino, yet entirely less distinct. And when he looked around his mind, Tarantino wasn't there anymore. Tarantino wasn't there, but this thread was still somehow caught on something. So he named that something Tarantino and gave it beady eyes and a beak of a nose. He told Caroline,

"I'm supposed to be the one having that kind of realization. Not you—all-knowing you."

"Then stop insulting me and have the realization. I don't have time for this."

"Do you love me?"

"Ah, Amos. I don't know. Who are you? Who am I? What does it matter? I have, like, 5 exams to study for, we're not getting anywhere with this. If it were up to me, we'd break up. There's no space for my feelings here. There's no space for me here. You think you're small and insignificant, but you take up so much space with those exact insecurities." She laughed. Amos laughed with her, gritted teeth and narrowed eyebrows.

“So that’s it, then?”

“I think that’s it, then. This is just bigger than us. I’ll still be around for you if you ever—”

“Fuck this,” Amos said, shaking his head and starting for the door.

“Amos, I’m sorry but, Jesus! Tell me why I’m wrong. Tell me! Have your realization, the floor is yours.”

“I could tell you, but I wouldn’t understand, would I? I’m so fucking...fucking...nothing, right, that I can’t even understand my own feelings. Isn’t that what you’re saying? This is bigger than us?”

“I’m just saying there are bigger things at play! Of course you don’t fully understand your feelings, I don’t either! The world does things to us, has certain rules that are written and unwritten and we just have to figure it out! We’re all just figuring it out.”

“Yeah, there’s no winner, right? It’s not a game like that, right? But you only said that because you knew you were gonna be winning. Well, fuck you. And your friends.”

And with that, Amos left Caroline’s house for the last time.

The next day, Amos found Tarantino at a side entrance to the convention centre. The air was hot, the pavement of the parking lot hotter. Amos wore sunglasses to look the part and to block the impending smoke from his eyes. He set down his 1200 feet of film and asked if Quentin would stand next to it for a photo.

“It’s my magnum opus,” Amos said. “It would mean everything to me.” Tarantino obliged. As Amos set himself up to take the photo, Tarantino’s assistant asked,

“You don’t want to be in the picture?”

“No,” Amos said. “It’s the film that really matters.” Amos placed a cigarette in his mouth and lit it with one of Caroline’s matches. Tarantino began to squirm and snigger.

“Hey, what’s up with this guy?” he asked his assistant, still standing in place. “I know they all smoke in my movies, kid, but you should quit. That shit’ll kill you.”

“Tell me,” Amos said. “Which movie of yours is your favourite?”

“Alright, take the photo,” the assistant said, stepping towards Amos. Tarantino replied quickly,



“Once Upon a Time in Hollywood, out now in theatres, alright? Take the photo.” Amos held the cigarette gently between his lips as he grinned.

“You know, I’m gonna be honest, I’m not really a fan.” He shut one eye and watched through the viewfinder of his camera as he flicked the cigarette onto the film and it burst into flames. Tarantino’s pant leg caught fire first, then his shirt sleeve, and then it was hard to tell because it spread so quickly. It spread almost as quickly as the security guards pinned Amos down and threw a blanket over their precious Quentin Tarantino.

Amos’ world is a much more manageable size now: a 48 square foot concrete cell.

Sometimes he calls Caroline from prison and says,

“Another collect call for your collection,” with a laugh. She laughs with him and accepts the call. When she heard what he’d done she thought, *oh my God. He finally gets*

*Tarantino.*

END

by Kate Cunningham

# The Inverted Story (AC-17-KBE)

## CONTAINMENT PROCEDURES:

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Anomaly AC-17-KBE ("The Inverted Story") is currently in the form of a .docx file stored and opened on a standard Bureau computer. This computer is to be kept running at all times and stored in a large room in the Containment Wing. To prevent unexpected complications in the event of the host computer's deactivation, the room is to be furnished with six (6) additional, running computers of equivalent make and model with copies of the file open, and seven (7) physical copies of document. Each computer runs a script that reopens the file whenever it is closed. Further copies of this file, digital or physical, are to be kept outside of the Containment Wing whenever possible.

Anomalous Concept 17 is currently in the form of .docx file, as mentioned previously, but upon the removal of this file from the screen it loses its anomalous properties and transfers to a nearby storage device, altering the data recorded there to fit it (see *The Inverted Story*). It prefers similar mediums as its previous host, but can jump to anything suitable, preferring closer objects and objects which require as little alteration as possible. Though it usually takes a physical form, its conceptual nature means that it can infect anything capable of recording and displaying it. Under the right conditions, it has been known to infect song, film, and even conversation and theatre – albeit briefly in the case of the last two. Any unnecessary objects that could record information are to be kept outside the containment room during studies.

## ANOMALOUS PROPERTIES:

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In addition to its anomalous method of transport, AC-17 is at all times observed by a person apparently created from thin air. Each created person (referred to as an Instance) varies from its predecessors but, when interviewed, claims to have led a life previous to its current existence. They demonstrate a lack of understanding of their situation, viewing their surroundings as their home, office, study, or similar reading place, not recognizing the presence of Bureau interviewers or the actual room's contents until prompted and then accepting them as part of their reality, as if in a dream. In their mind, they have come across the file through various methods, and are reading it on their own computer. They insist that they are real people but will often express some uncertainty regarding this, due to the file's content.

These Instances give strikingly lucid descriptions of their false lives, and as of yet have never refused to answer questions given to them. Bureau investigation has reliably proven that Instances are not copies of existing individuals, nor existing individuals removed from their real lives. They do not regard their interviewers' presence as unusual and, if made aware that it is, their perception of the world alters to rationalize it, now seeing their interviewers as coworkers or family members or, in some instances, now claiming their assumed reality to be different. All Instances attempt to steer conversation back to the Inverted Story, discussing both the story itself (see *The Inverted Story*) and its description and nature as if two parts of one fictional work. Many are created with notebooks and writing utensils and will record their thoughts even if left alone.

## ANOMALOUS PROPERTIES (CONTINUED):

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The most common types of Instance (composing roughly 93.5 percent of Instances) include:

- Bureau employees reading the file as part of their work.
- Civilians reading the file on a "found fiction" or conspiracy theory site.
- Authors who believe the file to be their own work.
- Publishers considered the file for publication.
- Friends or family sent the file by an author of it.
- Educators marking the file as a submission from a student.

If removed from AC-17's presence, made physically unable to view AC-17, given enough time to grow bored of their study of AC-17, questioned for too long without discussing AC-17, or killed, an Instance disappears and is replaced by another Instance. It is at this point that the anomaly transports itself if it has been destroyed or cannot easily be accessed in its current form. Both of these processes are apparently instantaneous. Any physical matter that was created when the Instance first appeared (including non-biological matter like clothing) disappears, while any preexisting physical matter ingested by one remains where they were when they disappeared and falls to the floor. Researchers are prohibited from offering Instances food or drink unless preapproved for research purposes by their Project Manager, at the request of the Sanitation Department.

## BACKGROUND:

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AC-17 was first discovered by a civilian archaeological team in Market Deeping, England, on 09/13/19█. During the excavation of a monastery that had burnt to the ground in 1540, the team discovered a cellar chamber that had been evidently unopened since the monastery's destruction. Within it was a physical book that hosted AC-17 as one of several dozen stories – all of which were variations on it (see *The Inverted Story*) and a monk who was copying it to another book, which disappeared along with him shortly after. Further Instances took on the resemblance of archaeologists and scholars, as well as at least one apparent Bureau agent, even before the Bureau arrived to suppress knowledge of the anomaly's existence.

The Inverted Story was transported along with the rest of the chamber's contents to the nearest Bureau facility, then to Headquarters. During this transit the books – all of which were discovered to have been so heavily altered by AC-17 that none of them contained any information other than it – were stored securely enough for it to deem none of them suitable, at which point it transferred to one of the first drafts of the document found here. Since then it has preferred to transfer to Bureau documents, even when forced into other forms by circumstance or research projects.

Research on AC-17 is currently being conducted by a team focusing on using secondary materials (such as its presence within larger bodies of work) to invoke particular kinds of Instance. To schedule further studies, please contact the Administration Department.

## THE INVERTED STORY:

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All versions of AC-17 contain a variation of the following story. Explanations of the anomaly's nature are frequent but not omnipresent and the smallest versions (which are prone to being destroyed by Instances, as if to free the anomaly from an unsatisfactory host) can reduce it to a few lines of prose, but this is theorized to be the "core" of AC-17 – what its Instances have been created to perceive.

*There once was a sorcerer who took it upon himself to take and teach an apprentice. In those days the great cities of the world – Atlantis, Mu, and many others beside – were dying, burning, and drowning one by one, and so the great knowledge of the past was being lost to time. The sorcerer and his apprentice travelled to the ruins of such cities and took from them books of magical knowledge – but they also left behind books of history and art, science and philosophy.*

*The apprentice asked him why. The sorcerer explained that a book's contents had no meaning without a reader, and those who would seek such things would learn them again, in the case of science and philosophy, or create their own, in the case of history and art. If a book had no use for him, he had no interest in it, for to lose its contents meant nothing. If something was forgotten it was as if it never existed at all.*

*Many years passed and the apprentice surpassed his master. He was a more worldly man but still a sorcerer, and thus unaccustomed to things like morals and restraint. One day he returned to his master, who was celebrating some grand birthday or another, and presented to him a book carried by a man who was reading it. The master thought nothing of it until the man put the book down, disappeared, and was replaced by a woman who picked it up and started to read.*

*The master asked him why. The apprentice said this: "You once told me that a book has no meaning without a reader. I thought it fitting to give you a reader who has no meaning without a book. For what are we but stories of our own, and what is the point of a story, if not to be remembered?"*

by Malcolm Svensson

## Welcome to the Waking World

I materialized in my physical body right before Lucy entered, and I watched as she slowly faded in. “You’re back,” I said, smiling.

“Adam, hey.” She smiled back at me, and the world smiled with her. I’m not being romantic — the world literally smiled with her. We stood in a forest clearing, and the trees around us had mouths that disappeared when we looked at them. They were always there in the corner of my eye though, grinning. Her dreams were always so surreal. Sometimes it made her uncomfortable, but it helped when I was there, I think.

“I’m sorry you had such a rough day,” I said, gently resting a hand on her arm. We only met in her dreams, but outside of them, I lived in her consciousness as a wisp of thought. I have since she was in ninth grade, when she first dreamt me up. I was a friend to her when she needed one, and we grew into something more as we talked every night. When she thought of me, I could feel what she felt, so I understood her better than anyone. Most nights, we would walk through her dreams, admiring the images her mind conjured, and I’d help her analyze them sometimes.

That day was bad, though. Her mom was sick for a while, and that day, Lucy got bad news. I heard the phone call and felt her sadness. I was with her as she fought through meetings, phone calls, and appointments, while nobody knew what she was struggling with. All day, I wished that I could hold her and be there for her instead of having to wait until she dreamed. I didn’t have to wait anymore, though, and I ran a hand through her hair. I thought it felt like velvet, and I noticed that at that moment, it literally was velvet. Her subconscious must have done that because I thought of it. I was a figment of her imagination, so our thoughts were usually intertwined somehow. I sometimes struggled with the fact that I existed solely as a piece of her and often wondered how independent I really was, but eventually I stopped wondering, because I felt like it didn’t matter — even if I was a true individual, I probably still would have lived for her. I loved her, after all.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Of course,” I replied.

The clearing grew around us, or, rather, the forest shrank, and the trees’ smiles shifted into silent screams as the earth swallowed them. She hadn’t noticed, and I convinced her to lay with me so that she wouldn’t. We talked less than usual that day as she laid her head on my chest and stared at the clouds, which whirled around each other in every colour that clouds don’t own. I was rarely able to help her with her problems, but I could always talk her through them, or help her get her mind off things. I liked being there, but I constantly wished to be outside of her head. I desperately wanted to be real.

“I’m flying to see mom tomorrow,” she murmured. She sounded exhausted. I didn’t know when she made those plans, so she must not have been thinking of me when she did. That was fine, though. It had happened a few times before, when she had a lot on her mind.

“It’s that bad?”

“Aunt Jackie said she might not make it.”

“Well, if you need to, sleep on the flight. I’ll keep you company.”

“I’d like that.” She sat up and looked around. “Adam, the clearing has grown.”

“It signifies freedom,” I lied. I knew what it really was. The clearing was a mass of emptiness that overwhelmed the living forest. She was dreaming about her mom’s tumour. Since I knew it, that meant that she knew it too, but I don’t think she wanted to. “Come on, let’s walk,” I said. She took my hand and we walked, watching the world waver as we wandered in the ever-shifting dreamscape.

The skies continued to swirl, and the wind blew leaves our way. They burst into swarms of lightning bugs behind us, and the grass changed to match the many colours of the sky as it flattened into a stained glass walkway. Everything else dissolved and the only things visible were the path, illuminated by lightning bugs, and the clouds above, which had turned into clouds of fairy floss.

A long time ago, Lucy told me that nobody knows why people dream. One theory is that it’s how brains file away memories while the body sleeps. It plays them back in a way that lets the brain store information to retrieve later, but the storage system doesn’t make any sense outside of the subconscious. The dreams, then, seem like nonsense to the waking world, but to the subconscious, they’re rich with memories and information.

“Where did the stained glass come from?” I asked.

“I walked past a church on my way home, and the sunset was at the perfect angle to light up the windows beautifully.”

“How come we’re walking on it?”

“Not sure. Maybe I’m thinking about the path to God or something. We’re walking towards death., I guess.”

“And the fairy floss?” I asked, pointing up. She chuckled, and the glass underneath her sparkled as her laughter hit it.

“Just hungry.”

She was going to wake up soon. It would sometimes happen suddenly, but other times, we could feel it coming. The world was getting unstable. The bugs vanished, and we looked down to see ourselves walking on nothing. My body began to fall apart. We said our goodbyes for the evening, and she woke up. The world disintegrated, and I went back to being a mere fragment of her conscious processes.

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We were in a recurring dream a few nights later. We walked down a hospital corridor towards her mom’s room. Usually in this dream we would walk and talk, and she would tell me how her mom was doing, and I would tell her that her mom is a strong woman, and then we would remember that we were walking to her mom’s room only to find that, despite our feet constantly moving, we were in the exact same place, and the hallway seemed to move with us.

The first few times, it was really stressful for her, but she had come to terms with it by then. I think that it had become cathartic, maybe even relaxing for her. Lucy never liked visiting her mom when she was sick, and said that she always seemed so frail and exhausted. She was a strong woman, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t using all of her energy. The illness was strong, too.

We turned the corner and walked into her mom’s room. I realized that it was the first time we’d made it there. It was the first time that space ever existed in a dream. She let go of my hand

as she covered her mouth and gasped. In the bed, her mom was covered in some kind of black, pustular fungus, rapidly growing and pulsating.

“Lucy, stay with me,” I begged, as the world began to collapse.

“How could you ask me to stay here?” She demanded, horrified.

“I didn’t mean — I’m sorry, I meant stay with me, not here. We can go somewhere el-“  
She disappeared, and the world dissolved again.

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That time though, I blacked out for a few days, which meant she didn’t even think about me at all, so I was really pleased to see her when she dreamt of me again.

“She’s gone, Adam. The chemo made things worse,” she said as she faded in on the park bench next to me. She didn’t look for me as she entered — she knew I would be here. We sat on a bench and looked out over the sea, which was far below the cliffside we were on.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there, Lucy.”

“I’m not.”

I felt like an icicle speared my heart, and I had to check to make sure one didn’t. It had happened before. I looked at her and desperately tried to hide the sadness in my voice. “Why do you say that?”

“I dreamt of her instead. She was so sick, in the hospital, you know? She’s been sick for years. But in my dreams, she was the woman that fed me and raised me. She was my mom again. I was glad to see her.”

It was the first dream in ten years that I wasn’t in. “I’m glad that you got that experience,” I said. I rested a hand on her shoulder, and she pushed it off. I didn’t understand why she was being so cold to me. I looked around at the dream. The sky was a gradient of gold and blue as the sun rose, and the water that stretched before us endlessly was calm. Behind us, birds chirped in the jungle, and a soft breeze rustled the leaves. It was a happy dream for her.

“Adam, she wasn’t real. In my dream, that is.” Her tone was gentle, but unwavering. “She was a shadow of my mom that I made up. It’s hardly any better than the shadow of my mom that died in that hospital. And the only real version of my mom was the one that I grew up with, before she got sick. Not the one that was fighting to survive for every waking hour, or the one that was made up from my memories. Do you understand?” I looked at her and nodded.

“My mom died years ago, and I missed her last moments without even realizing it. I don’t even remember what they were. How much more of my life — or the lives of the people I love — have I lost, because I’ve been too wrapped up in myself? Or, for that matter, in you? I love you, Adam. God, you feel more more real than you have any right to. But you’re not, and you never can be. I know that now. I need to focus on what *is* real. I need to focus on what can be taken from me.”

I looked out across the water. A tear rolled down my cheek and fell, but instead of hitting the ground, it defied gravity and floated out over the cliffside. It dropped into the ocean, and the water rose up to meet the edge of the cliff. The sunrise was at the perfect angle to light up the waves beautifully.

“So this is it, then?” I asked.

“This is it, Adam. I have to be in the waking world, now.”

“You know I won’t exist anymore, right? If you stop dreaming about me?”

“Yeah.”

I could tell she felt guilty, but she had no choice. That was it for me. I stood up, and used a finger to tilt her chin up so she was looking at me. “I hope you remember me some day, and I can say hello.” She was trying not to cry. My silhouette reflected in her glistening eyes which, in the dream, were a mosaic of colours. I wondered what she saw out of them. I bent down to kiss her goodbye, and in her eyes, I saw my body fade away. My lips never reached hers.

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She never dreamt of me again. She talked about me, though. She told her friends about me once, and one of them thought about me a lot. He wrote about me. He didn't think it was fair that I had to stop existing just because I wasn't needed anymore. He thought that, if my story got out, people might think about me, too. I might live on in more minds than one. He was right.

Hi. I'm Adam.

by Braedon Lowey



## The Visitor

Sadie McKinney and Jack Hutchinson were the only ones left in the Red Fox when the storm came. The midnight winds reeked of charred meat cutting through the valley, and rain battered the tin roof of the bar while the road out front turned into a river of branches and debris flowing into the drainpipes.

Sadie's fourth headache of the day cropped up as she wiped down the bar. Jack sat across from her, working on his seventh lager of the night. Outside, distant thunder rang between the hills.

"Ten minutes, Jacky. Shutting down early tonight."

"Never seen it like this, all my years."

"I thought you were around for the storm of sixty-three?"

"Have I been around that long?"

"Longer than the rest." Sadie pointed to the clock. "Ten minutes."

"I'll outlive 'em all. Outlived my Papi. Hell, probably be here long after you."

Sadie dropped her gaze. Clenching her rag, she crossed to the window and began cleaning it. "Finish up, Jacky."

His silence said everything. She sensed him hunting for the words.

"Shit. I meant nothing by it, Sadie. Shouldn't have opened my big mouth. Nothin' ever good comes out of it after five—"

"It's okay, hun."

"No, no, it ain't. I think..." He wavered and stifled a burp. "I think if anyone can beat it, it's you."

Sadie scrubbed the window. Harder, faster. Outside, rain showered down the glass. She stopped and pinched her fingers between her eyebrows, then walked back over to Jack. "One out of ten thousand."

"Huh?"

"Those are the odds. One out of ten thousand people. I don't get no say in it."

Jack considered this for a moment. "The Man Upstairs does. Miracles happen every day, you know."

"Only miracle I hope to see around here is you payin' your tab sometime this month. The 'Man Upstairs' sure as shit ain't gonna fill my register."

A flash of lightning caught Sadie's eye and she glanced out the blotted window. A large, dark shape sat in the middle of the street—its head lowered under the weight of the heavy rain, beady eyes peeking up at her.

It barked and a clap of thunder followed. Sadie dropped her rag. "I think there's a dog out there."

"Hmm?" Jack mumbled, mouth full of beer.

"There's a stray dog out there. Go let it in, will you?"

"Can I at least finish my beer?"

Sadie raised an eyebrow and Jack got up from his stool and put on his coat. "I can finish it when I get back."

"Thank you."

He stumbled out, more so from the wind than from the seven pints. Sadie saw through the water-stained window his blurry outline approach the hound.

She continued wiping down the bar, thinking about miracles. Jack was right. He would be here long after her. Old-timers like him—living their life by the drop, blowing up their livers and marriages in the process—always make it. For whatever reason God decided, they're the ones kept around the longest. People like Jack don't get cancer.

Fuck miracles.

A cry from outside bit through the night. Sadie turned and listened.

Another cry.

She went around the bar, hurrying as she approached the door.

Jack lay in the road like a logjam in a creek, the hound nowhere to be found.

"Jack!" She ran out to him, shielding the wind from her face. The water around him reddened and flowed down the street with the mud. Sadie tried to lift him. "You're gonna have to help me out."

As Sadie helped Jack to his feet, his scream was scarcely heard through the deafening winds. She slung his arm around her and they made their way into the Red Fox.

Inside, Sadie cleared the billiard table and laid him down. Jack writhed in agony, holding his stomach. Something was falling out of it.

"It hurts."

"Don't move."

"Sadie, it hurts!"

"For Christ's sake, Jack, let me think." Sharp pain splintered through her head. Thunder rattled the walls and Sadie felt it through the table. The overhead light flickered. She took off her apron and lifted Jack's shirt then wrapped the apron around his torso. "Stay still."

She moved to the bar and grabbed the phone off the hook and dialed 911 but it was only a dial tone and as she went to yell to Jack, the lights went out and Jack's cries pierced through the blackness.

"Hold on, Jack." She was rifling through the cupboards for first aid supplies when the front door blew open.

Under the arch stood a tall, dark figure outlined by the moonlight and dripping wet. He wore a brimmed hat and held a briefcase and wore a long overcoat that flapped violently with the wind. Sadie could hardly make out his face but saw a thin moustache drooping down each side of his lips.

She started toward him. "Help. My friend needs help."

The man was silent with the rain against his back. He took a step forward, wiped his feet, then closed the door. He crossed to the billiard table and loomed above Jack, who now shivered in silence. The man delicately lifted Jack's shirt. "I can help, if... that is what you want."

"Yes," Sadie said. "Please, anything."

"First, I require something." He turned on his heel and walked over to the bar.

“Sir.” Sadie followed him. “He’s bleeding out.”

The man pulled out a stool and sat down, then brushed the countertop with his sleeve and placed his briefcase on the clean surface. “A whiskey, please.”

Sadie hurried behind the bar and reached for a glass. “For the wound?”

“For myself. Neat.”

She paused. “Is that a joke?”

“No, Ms. McKinney, I assure you.”

“Sir, I don’t have time for—” Her skin crawled. She took a step back. “Do I know you?”

“I’m a friend.”

“All my friends went home for the night, and not one of them calls me Ms. McKinney. Again, who are you?”

“Only a passerby who wishes to help.”

“Then help.”

“I suppose that drink isn’t coming?”

Sadie gave him nothing. Only a look.

“Right. Well then, I’ll get right to it. I have in here—” He reached for his briefcase. Sadie drew back.

“Please,” he said. He gestured to the suitcase, then opened it. “I have in here something that will be of much interest to you.” He pulled out a document and slid it across to her. A snap of lightning lit up his face, and as Sadie winced it went all dark again and she was never more grateful for the dark than in that moment.

The man interlocked his bony, spider-like fingers and nodded to the document.

“I don’t believe this,” Sadie said. “Whatever you’re selling, I’m not buying.”

She was about to go over to Jack when the man said: “Not even if it’s Jack’s life?”

She turned to the man. “You need to leave. Now.”

“Pease, we mustn’t waste time. Your friend has not long to live. I’d give him, say, three minutes before he succumbs to the shock.”

Sadie looked over the man’s shoulder and called out to Jack.

“He’s unconscious, but alive, I assure you.” The man tapped his finger on the document. “Read, please.”

Sadie picked it up. “I can’t. It’s too dark.”

The man pulled out a match from his coat pocket, and with the sharp point of his thumbnail, flicked the head, illuminating the space between him and Sadie. He handed her the match. She held it up to the document. It was blank, with only a single horizontal line in the centre.

“I don’t follow. What is this, like a release form?”

“In a sense. Practically speaking, though, it’s an offer. Sign it, and Jack’s life will be spared.”

“Just like that?”

“Poof. Just like that.”

“What’s the catch?”

“Of course, there is a fee.”

“Spill it.”

“You will live out your remaining days, as you are, slowly withering away, with the cancer feasting on your body until it inevitably betrays you. When all is said and done, I will be granted possession of your soul, in so many words. Call it a life for a life, if you will.”

The room swam around Sadie, her knees ready to buckle. “I’m not playing your game—”

“But you haven’t heard the rest of my offer. Would you like to hear it?”

“No, thank you.”

“Oh, I really think you would.”

Sadie shuddered and coiled her arms around herself like a blanket—eyes closed, lips pressed together.

“If you should choose not to sign it—and it is entirely *your* choice—you will, from this moment forward, live a long and healthy life, cancer-free. And, of course, your soul will remain yours to keep.”

Sadie’s face went flush white, the room now spinning.

“You have, what, twelve months left?” the man said.

“Something like that.”

“Hand me back that paper as it is, unsigned, and it all goes away. All the restless nights, all the headaches, the vomiting. All the pain.”

“And Jack?”

“Jack dies here on your table, within the minute.”

“You’re a sick man.”

He slammed his palms on the countertop and Sadie jerked back. With wild, fiery eyes, he leaned in close. “I’m a businessman. Here merely to offer you a choice. Just as you chose to have Jack go out into that dreadful storm knowing full well it wasn’t safe.”

“I didn’t—”

“You did. You did and now Jack is dying because of your decision. Fortunately for you, though, you can make it up to him. See, life is full of choices. And what I’ve offered you here is a gift. The gift of choice, to make up for all the bad ones you’ve made.”

Sadie looked over at Jack. How well did she know him? He has a kid. Two kids. A boy and a girl. But his ex never lets him see them. How much would they miss him?

How much would Sadie be missed in twelve months—how long until the patrons she calls friends would forget about her? Not very long, she guessed. As is the nature of drunkards.

Flashes of white spilled against the walls with every streak of lightning and Sadie’s headache pounded almost in unison with the rolling thunder. She thought about choices.

And miracles.

“One minute remaining,” the man said.

“I need a pen.”

“You have one.”

The man pointed to the match, but it was no longer a match. It was a ballpoint pen. It trembled in Sadie’s hand.

“Sign above the line,” the man said.

Sadie drew a deep breath, signed the document, and handed it back to him.

A smirk revealed itself from behind the man's moustache as he looked it over. "You're not as predictable as I presumed. Jack should be so lucky to call you a friend."

"I need him. I'm waiting on a bar tab."

The man got up from the stool, put the document in his briefcase, and tipped his hat. "Pleasure doing business with you, Sadie."

"What now?"

"I'll be in touch."

He walked toward the door, and Sadie realized the lightning and thunder had stopped. The storm had come and gone.

The man left. Sadie snapped out of her bewilderment and crossed the room to Jack. He was awake, sitting on the table.

"Sadie..."

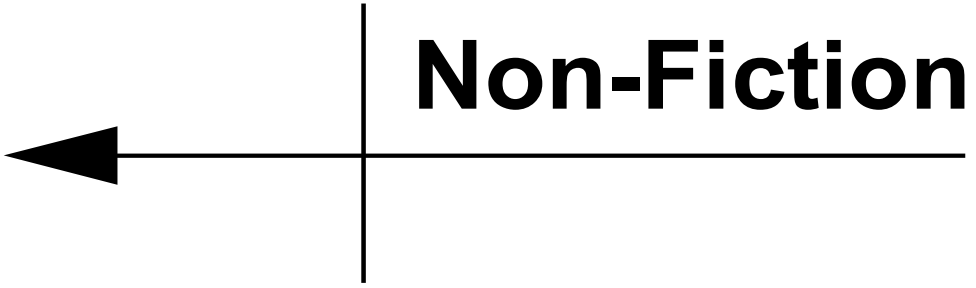
"Stay put." She lifted his shirt and unwrapped the apron. No wound. No blood. She smoothed her hand over his stomach.

"What happened?" Jack asked.

"A miracle."

Sadie walked out to the porch and squinted as the morning glow fell across her face. Rainwater dripped from the roof's gutter, and scattered puddles in the road shimmered from the sunlight. Another headache came on. Sadie smiled. Remembering what it was like to smile again, she laughed. In the distance, the tall man strolled down the road. In his hand, his briefcase. Beside him, his hound.

by Corey Morell



**Non-Fiction**

1

### Autopsy Report (Cause of Death: Mortification)

You become aware of your body in increments.

First, your feet, oddly-shaped, sticking out at ninety-degree angles. *They are not delicate feet*, your father says. *They are feet meant for boys—broad and thick. Be glad we're not the Chinese*, he adds smugly, as if your culture is immune to criticism. *They would grind your feet into elegant hooves so that you can be trotted out to potential husbands. But here. See how we indulge you.* He leads you into the shoe department, past what look like torture devices, past sombre leather shoes, past colourful runners that light up when the outsoles make contact with the ground. He hands you a pair of sensible shoes with the letter 'M' stitched into the tongue. *See how you can invert the letter*, he says, proud of his little mischief. *No one will have to know that we bought this pair in the male section of the store.* You wonder, even then, what gender has to do with your feet.

Later, you become aware of your shins and your calves, and the various wounds and scars that mar your skin. In the years before you inherit your older sister's room, you recall sleeping next to your *yaya*<sup>1</sup>, your bare legs susceptible to the feather-light scuttle of indifferent cockroaches. When cysts begin to appear along your ankles and across the wide expanse of your legs, you are told that the cockroaches have implanted their eggs into your skin. Will you become some kind of insect hybrid? Will you grow antennae and scuttle upside-down or squeeze yourself along the niches of your house? At least cockroaches are resilient, you think, and resign yourself to pretending your legs no longer exist. (They are dirty places, your legs. Touch them and perhaps the blister-cysts might spread to the rest of your body.)

You become aware of your knees a few months before your first Holy Communion. There's a lot of kneeling prior to the main event, you see. You kneel several times a day on

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<sup>1</sup> A live-in maid, often treated like family. I still think about her sometimes. I hope she is well.



pebbled ground, rearranging your skirt to minimize the pain of kneeling for so long, even as food is being prepared just a few feet away, the scents of deep-fried potato, powdered cheese, and chicken meat distracting you, the air tasting like sin. You kneel in front of a priest to confess your childish transgressions and ask for forgiveness from the Almighty. The church pew is padded for your convenience, and the priest is unremarkable save for the touch of condescension in his half-lidded eyes. You don't remember what he looks like because he is simply a stand-in for God, but you never forget the condescension. It follows you into adulthood.

There is not much to say about your thighs except that they are large and milk-white, shamed early into hiding underneath layers of Catholic-approved modesty, the pleated beige monstrosity swallowing much of your lower half. *Everyone has cellulite*, says your mother, your aunts, your sisters and your *yaya*. Except men. You think maybe men use hair to hide theirs.

Your father isn't impressed with your conclusions—first eager, then biting, then cool. You stop talking to your father.

You're not really sure about the void between your legs. Nobody seems keen to talk about it until you start bleeding. Suddenly you're a gender. Suddenly you require labels to define your habits and interests, your manners and way of dress. You wish, in the days of your youth, that the only label you wore was, "Fragile. Handle with care." Perhaps you would have been treated better.

Certainly it would have kept them from making snide remarks about your waist and stomach. Your sister calls those parts of you "love handles," but it doesn't feel like they've been handled with love. Instead, this expanse of skin becomes a measure of your standing within the family. Your younger sister, who maintains her thin frame, gains freedoms even as you lose them. Her curfew stretches into the night while yours compresses into the brief moments between sunrise and sundown, like a lightbulb flash from an old camera. You pretend that your bellybutton is a frowning mouth that expresses the hurt you cannot articulate. You pretend that

your stomach isn't actually yours but your parents'. It's the only part of you that they've taken an interest in.

In one of your more lucid moments, navel-gazing over the unfairness of the world, you notice the stretch marks on your stomach: ugly red lines that measure the extent of your failures. Were they always there? You suppose it doesn't matter. You can't imagine baring yourself to another person in a moment of weakness.

You can't imagine baring yourself.

You can't imagine.

You *could*, perhaps, imagine loving your hands instead. You make an inventory of your crooked fingers, your soft pale palms, your blue-veined wrists in search of something tangible underneath the surface, a love—a *feeling*—that you can hold onto. But their ease of access makes them prime targets for mapping out the hurt you harbour in your chest: your hands are intimate with the colour red, with the sting of retribution, with the rough indifference of walls, with the blunt edge of your teeth pressing firmly against your flesh. You wish you can remember instead the warmth of another's flesh against your own, indulgent fingers tracing the lifelines of your palms. But such actions feel contrived—more appropriate in the realm of fiction where you had first gleaned them bit by bit: touches of intimacy so fleeting your hands are still haunted by them.

Your back curves with the weight of your grievances. Soon, it becomes apparent that something is wrong. You become familiar with the scuff marks of your leather shoes, the dizzying pattern of your school skirt, and the protruding embarrassment that further divides you from your peers. The secondhand bras do little to hide them. Turtling into yourself doesn't help either. They only serve to antagonize your parents further. *Straighten up. You already have white*

hair—do you want to act like a lola too?<sup>2</sup> My God. You act like you're already tired of life. Just wait until you're my age.

Eventually, your parents take a page out of your aunt's book<sup>3</sup> and get a custom-made halter for you. You wear it under your school blouse and ignore the looks of curiosity that you receive. *It's for your own good*, your parents say. That has become one of their many mantras, right after, *nobody wants a fat wife*, and *you were perfect as a baby so I prayed to God that you would get some ugly in you*. *He answered my prayers and now you are too ugly*. You wish God would answer *your* prayers and get rid of the ugly in your parents' hearts.

There is no point looking at your face because it is invisible in the eyes of the public. They notice the great trembling mass leading up to the face just as you do. You stop looking at mirrors; you've had enough of self-reflections.

In the quiet of that moment, in the inky-black void of your ever-swirling thoughts like dogs chasing after their tails, teeth gnashing uselessly, you hear the slow zipping noise of a rubber bag being sealed shut.

“Here is the ruin of my body. *Have you feasted your eyes enough?*”

The taste of accusation on my tongue is foul, but there's a hint of truth in it. I have returned again and again to my past like a medical examiner to a failing body to survey what has been destroyed and immerse myself in the pain of my youth, transforming these moments of self-reflection into moments of self-flagellation. It's a familiar place, a haunting place—a site of violence that festers still at the edges of my vision. I return to these places because they are evidence that I am broken and cannot be fixed. I have cut neat incisions into my flesh in the hopes of compartmentalizing what has been, as if the body that I inhabit is merely a trophy of the

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<sup>2</sup> In our language, *lola* means grandmother. Acting like one does not afford you the same respect, however.

<sup>3</sup> Written by a veteran nurse and taken as gospel.

past. But that is not true; the body does not cease existing just because I wish to rid myself of my past. The body was, is, will be. This is a truth that I cannot outrun.

It would be so simple to celebrate my body as a young parent might celebrate their child. Here are my ten toes and my ten fingers—see how I wriggle them clumsily. Here are my heels, pressing gently against my parent’s chest, or my pudgy stomach, milk-stained and unimaginably soft. See how I am beloved. See how I am cherished.

(I was once their prized *Santo Niño*<sup>4</sup>: a child idol who was passed around from relative to relative as if I could infect them with good fortune. And then I grew up. Funny how things turn out.)

I feel defiance settle like a second skin while sorrow courses through me, mixing with the oxygen that I've breathed in. I know intimately the imperfections that mar my body, and I understand with perfect clarity what must be done. Still, the steps to recovery might as well be Sisyphus’s hill for how slippery and treacherous they are, how often I am given to backpedaling at the slightest bit of criticism that comes my way. Nevertheless, I must persist.

by Mary Grace Fojas

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<sup>4</sup> The child figure of Jesus Christ. You could say I was briefly complicit in the act of blasphemy.

Down the Hammer

## Down the Hammer

My most evocative memories of living in a home sliced in half, its core open to the elements, were the mornings. The dark. The cold, the kind that turns bones into icicles. Exposed 2x4 walls. Bare plywood floors, our carpet of slivers. Dangling light bulbs. The tinny transistor radio always set to CJOR, always too high, blaring out the barks of Pat Burns.

By necessity, there was always a fire in the unfinished fireplace with no screen, struggling to heat what it couldn't. Shivering, teeth chattering, I was drawn to its warmth each morning and had the willpower of a moth when it came to tearing myself away for school, even when the pulsating glow of the red-orange-white wood spewed sparks, landing with perfect precision on my brown pinafore to reveal the white of my collared shirt underneath. I knew it wouldn't go well for me once those tiny holes were discovered but nothing could pull me away. Not even a rough, calloused hand striking my cheek. Burn, burn away.

Cruelty can come easily to some people. It did for Dad. It did for some of the nuns at our school where the teaching tool of choice was a thick ruler or leather strap. Both he and those nuns of enlightenment fed on humiliation. At home, Dad would mimic our sobs making us weep more. At school, the disobedient in the tremulous flock obediently stood at the front of the class, eyes downcast, hands out, cheeks burning—a scene on heavy rotation. Something was missing in those nuns, like the thing missing in Dad.

He had a thick head of dark brown hair that, even when it turned snowy white with age, never deserted him. Brylcreem, to tame that mane without getting too slick about it, and Old Spice were for Sunday, the day that mattered to him most. Large brown eyes, strong nose, generous mouth, he was handsome. His commanding voice could split ear drums. Most of his height came from his

temper. Sense of humour? In his pocket, nestled against his white cotton handkerchief, both sparingly used.

Dad first came to Vancouver in the late 1950s when his country's economy was in freefall. North American promises penetrated people like him. Work hard, make money, send some home. With a handful of English words, he set off, first by ship to Pier 21, then by train across Canada. It took some years for me to understand his flashes of temper in those early days. I'd return from kindergarten uttering English words that his ears couldn't bear to hear at home. The thing he wanted us to understand most was that he left everything he knew—family, friends, language, food—alone, with a loaf of bread and \$20.

Back then you got married. After three Canadian years, Dad returned to his hometown in search of a wife. It was hardly a search (my parents were neighbours) but it took determination as he proposed his way down the aunt hierarchy until he reached Mom—13 years his junior, still in her teens—and finally got his yes.

What was missing in Dad, in those nuns, Mom had in abundance. Stylish, slender, she was tenderness and warmth. Light brown locks, soft and wavy, danced over her slim shoulders. It never took much for her blue-green eyes to break out into the kind of smile that embraced. One Saturday morning in our bungalow, I was in charge of making breakfast while she styled someone's hair (to earn extra dollars from home). Biting my bottom lip, I gripped the handle of the large frying pan and made my way to the kitchen table. But it teetered badly, then bacon and eggs dropped to the floor to become one with the golden locks that had been cut earlier. Bursting into tears, I dropped to the floor too. Unflappable Mom put down her comb and helped me up. She lifted my chin. Blinking, dripping eyes met pools of tranquility. "Start over. It will be okay. You'll see."

Although locked in tradition, Dad could be surprisingly progressive. Division of labour was one area. It was his expectation that everyone pitch in. That wasn't the way of other traditional families in our neighbourhood where gender roles were clearly defined, never crossed. Not in our house. We all did the dishes. We all tucked into "men's work", like holding up Gyprock while Dad hammered it into place. We all installed Fibreglass insulation, though I would have appreciated some advice about why it's *not* okay to do that without skin protection. He was too busy getting mad about who-knows-what to stop me from running my hands along the fibrous orange material that felt like a cat's tongue.

And so, there we were, our family of five squeezed into a two-bedroom bungalow, three kids to a double bed and a baby on the way. It was my poor suffering sister's destiny to sleep in the middle because she couldn't compete with older siblings who had strong ideas about who would *not* take that spot. I was eight, my brother was seven, and my sister, whose bouts of crying were legendary in our family, was two.

Nothing got wasted. Ever. When Mom was in the hospital giving birth a year later for the fourth time, Dad took over the cooking. Moldy bacon didn't faze him. It got rinsed, cooked, and everything on your plate you had to eat. I did, then threw up.

A bigger mortgage for a bigger house deepened the lines of worry on my parents' brows. Between running a household and sending funds overseas to Mom's parents when lives there spiralled, money was tight. And, though I'd like to think that she was consulted about the construction plans, looking back I just don't think Dad had it in him. There was the time, some 20 years later, when he renovated the kitchen without her input. After finishing, you'd be hard pressed to see a difference between the old and new. Only he would track down and install cupboards and countertops that were identical to those he had just demolished. That Mom didn't want the



renovation in the first place was irrelevant. That kitchen renovations are disruptive? Also irrelevant, because five years later he went in for another go, having come rather late to the realization that his decision to install identical cabinetry and countertops was, well, a little nuts.

Unlikely, then, that he consulted Mom on the construction plans, that he'd build the house himself, that we'd live on site since we couldn't afford not to. The plan of up-and-down halves he hatched went like this: half of our East Vancouver bungalow would be demolished; we'd live in the remaining half until the new half was up; the last of the bungalow would go down; and the rest of the new house would go up. It was a crazy and fraught, especially with you-know-who in control.

By 7:00 a.m., he'd be at his day job in construction. Dinner was 5:00, then work on the new house would begin. Sure, the neighbours complained about his nightly hammer-and-saw concertos. But if he had no qualms about waving hammers at city inspectors, chasing them away if they got in *his* way, then he certainly had no time for pesky neighbours. As the pursuer of the last word, he could outlast anyone in shouting matches. Anyone. Even his long-time friend—a priest. I doubt he saw himself as unreasonable. October was coming. The pressure was on to finish the new house before winter.

Living in a home sliced in half should have felt like an adventure. It didn't. It was hard work, and cold. The new half faced into what remained of our bungalow. In one half we slept, in the other we ate. Depending on where you were, you could jump up or down, or climb up or down a ladder, to cross over. For our protection, heavy plastic sheets closed off the two interiors.

While we all shared the construction work, my siblings and I also shared terror. It would freeze our squirms into stillness when Dad yelled out for a tool. "What's a rasp?", my brother whispered nervously while I thought, *I'm just so relieved it's not me!* If you were unlucky enough to hear your name, you'd better know what a rasp was and where to find it in the dark mess of his

workshop. Because if you couldn't, and he had to stomp down a ladder or some other perch, unhinged, to cross our carpet of slivers, you could be sure that his raspy hand would land on your cheek. "Simple" he'd say, walking away.

Eventually, somehow, we survived. The bigger house got built and, although we siblings didn't have separate bedrooms, we were now two to a room. All that space? Our own beds? Gold dust.

\* \* \*

With the arduous construction over, we now had time for some fun! On Sunday afternoons, we'd pile into our sunshine-yellow Impala, three of us in the back and Mom holding our little brother in her lap at the front while Dad drove erratically. These pleasure outings typically involved two things: touring Dad's worksites, where he'd point here and there explaining carpentry feats, while we took it all in without leaving the car; and wailings of despair from the back seat. Crying was my sister's soother.

I'd come to find Dad's little sparks of enlightenment pleasing, then perplexing, then wishing he'd just stop it with the sparks. There was the time he said that, when it came to relationships, ethnicity didn't matter so long as there was love (and Catholicism, but that's for another time). How *almost* enlightened of him, I thought! Then that spark was tested, then it went out when a family member dated a person of colour.

Dad felt pride sometimes, no question. By the time my siblings and I were all in school, Mom did something amazing. *She* went back to school. He was a big believer in education, supported it, encouraged it. But there was always that "but" with him. "Go ahead! But if you can't keep up around here, school goes." With that encouragement, she got her Canadian high school equivalency, then became a Registered Nurse.

Mom got heaps of joy from cooking, nourishing, watching us be nourished. She got joy from textiles. For a time, it was needlepoint. Her largest canvas, an image of *The Last Supper*, was 4x2 feet. Watching her needle weave through the canvas nightly after dinner sparked Dad's interest. After some instruction from Mom, he took up the needle too, working the canvas each morning before work. When it was finished, it got framed and nailed far too high in the living room.

Dad's behaviour could be unpredictable. The clamour of his construction years took his hearing and now *we* were doing the yelling. Poring over the application that could help cover the cost of hearing aids, getting him to focus on recounting his work history, was like stopping a squirming child. Eventually, he got his aids, but then refused to wear them. "Please", Mom implored one Sunday over lunch. Putting down his spoon, he went to their bedroom while our 10 inquisitive eyes, brows way up, followed him. We looked up from our soup bowls when he returned. There were the hearing aids, dangling from his nostrils.

Dad's behaviour could be unsettling. Not his death. He surprised us with his grace. Bold, stoic, unflinching, an unwavering believer on his terms, these things carried him and that carried us because, as difficult as he was, there was nothing easy about watching him face his mortality.

After a long vigil in his hospital room one night, we left to get some sleep. Around midnight, my sister called, panic-stricken. Her wallet was missing. "Please, can we go back to the hospital together? It's so late. I'm..."

We returned. My partner and sister set off to search a nearby lounge while I waited in Dad's room. The low lighting, the quiet, it was peaceful until the erratic breathing started. I ran for his nurse, then searched for my partner and sister. Gathered around him, we watched, listening hard. Shallow breathing alternated between unnervingly long gaps, and longer ones, and then it all stopped.

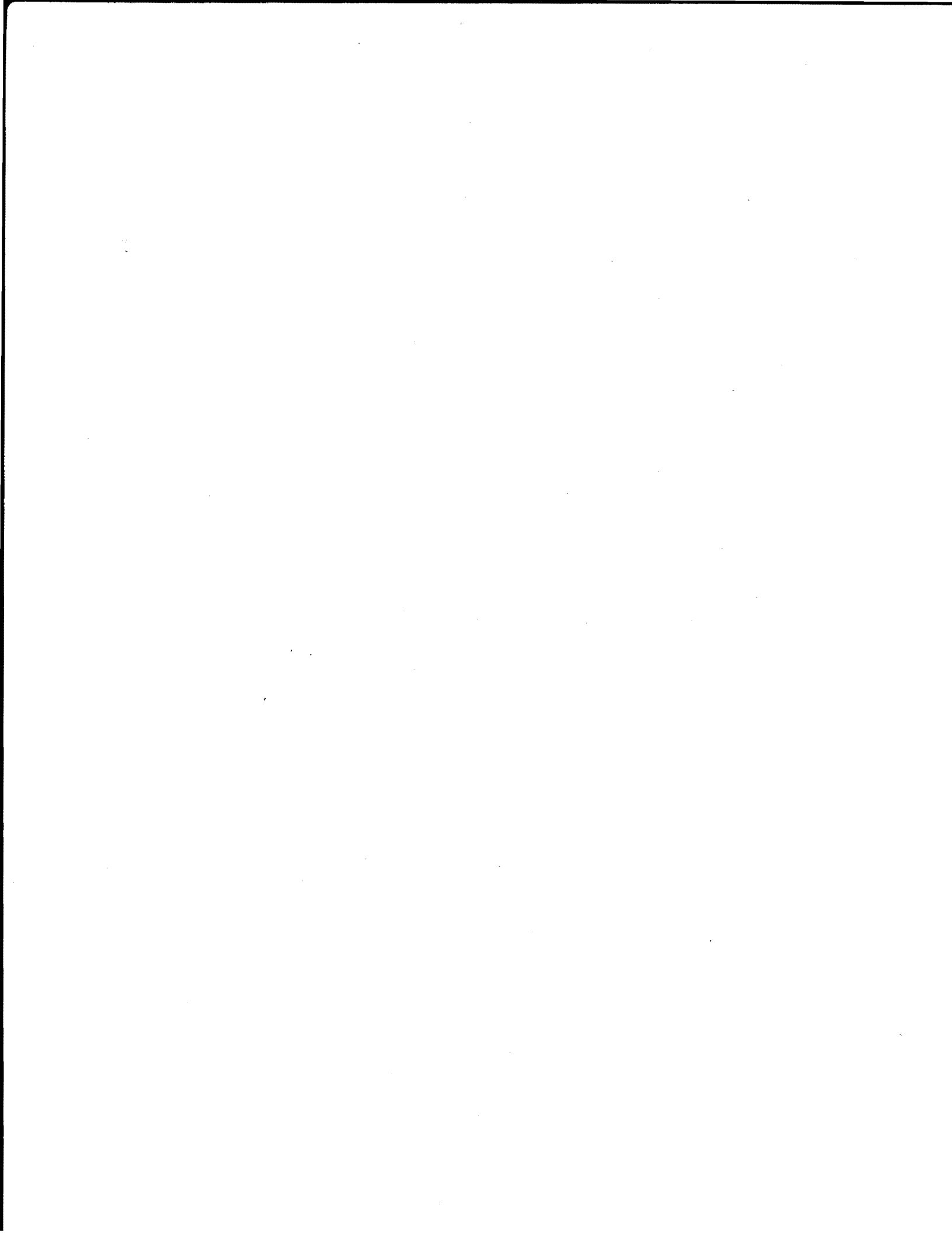
But Dad had one last “but” to deliver. After an alarming amount of time, without warning, his mouth opened wide, gasping for air with such intensity that it shifted his body and made us jump.

It was after 3:00 a.m. when we got home and my sister called. She had found her wallet on her doorstep.

\* \* \*

There are still some of my parents’ belongings in our garage that I need to sort out, one being *The Last Supper*. During a tidying spree, my partner hung it from a nail on an exposed 2x4. Weeks later, as he bent over to lift a winter tire, *The Last Supper* became unhinged. A corner of its frame delivered a gash to his head, drew blood, then hit the concrete floor, breaking frame and glass, spilling out the canvas.

by Lydia Lovison



## Karl

I was wrong about the chest pains. A twisting feeling sat in my chest and pulled at my shoulders for weeks. It weighed me down like a marionette with its strings collapsed. When I first felt it, I thought it was a heart attack. The ache concerned me less after it lasted for weeks and I realized it was not a direct threat to my mortality. I figured heart attacks could not last that long, or if they did, maybe I would be a new medical marvel. However, it was unsettling the way it arose out of nowhere and refused to go away.

To ease the ever present strain, I would rub on my shoulders. Sometimes I would rub so hard I could feel my nails digging into my skin. There was something underneath I needed to extract so badly that my nails would break the flesh, forming small red crescents on my skin. That something was sitting there, right in the center of my chest. The deeper I dug with my nails the further it buried itself, until it created a little home right next to my heart. I had acquired a new but unwelcome tenant. Out of my generous hospitality, when my new tenant decided to stay, I gave him a name: Karl.

Karl was an eerie looking little fellow. A blur of black scribbles made up his gangly figure that was framed by unnecessarily long spindly arms. His arms reached to such an incredible length, they could have wrapped around his tiny build hundreds of times. Karl's short stature was made up for by his cold and unnerving glare. However, what was most unnerving about Karl was his unwavering grip on anything he wanted. He quickly coiled himself around my ribcage and refused to let go, like a tangled mess of black wires.

Sometimes Karl and I got along. When Karl kept to his own space and out of my business, we coexisted peacefully. The problems started when he decided to get a little nosy. He

would peek through my ribcage to see what he could meddle with. If he saw something he liked, he would swing towards it from rib to rib, like the rungs on the monkey bars.

When Karl decided to visit me, he made it hard for me to breathe. Karl extended his prickly arms from his home and wrapped them around my heart and lungs. He squeezed until I felt like they would burst. Sometimes Karl snuck out of my ribcage and reached up into my eyes to push tears out, pouring them down my cheeks. When Karl got really mean, he slunk up into my brain and pulled at my thoughts, taking the positive ones for himself and leaving the negative ones free to roam around my mind. It was safe to say Karl had no understanding of personal space.

At first, I could live with him. Spending most of his time brooding in my chest, he only came out every couple weeks. Although he made it hard to look up in the highschool halls or approach new people, I managed. The word shy often closely followed my name. Nothing I did could abolish that title. Once “shy” was attached to my name, it was the dominant characteristic people identified me as. My name became dismissed by these claims and my presence around people shrunk. Karl started to feed off of this, spooning these insecure thoughts into my mind. I thought the worthlessness I felt was visible to everyone around me. Perhaps it was. Eyes locked on the floor and rounded shoulders did not give off the air of confidence I was hoping to carry.

It became harder when the attacks came. Karl decided to start coming out of his little home more often and visited at least a few times a week. When Karl came, my body was on autopilot and he was controlling my every move. He chose when I sobbed, breathed, smiled and talked. It was Karl playing with my emotions, like a child would a toy, and I was being forced to watch from the sidelines.

Karl's cue to attack started as soon as my bedroom door clicked shut. He had enough decency to wait until I was home, but that was where his decency ended. Tears would collect on my pillow and red crescents would decorate my shoulders. I did not want Karl to stay with me anymore. I wanted to evict him, but I could not figure out how while keeping his presence secret.

While Karl wreaked havoc on my emotions, my physical health struggled to balance itself out. Trips to the doctor's office became normal at least twice a month. The office's green plush chairs and my doctor's round concerned eyes became a new comfort for me. She slowly would ask how I was doing, worried for my decreasing health and mood. One afternoon, as I shuffled my feet and made new green crescents on the arms of her chair, she leaned forward inquisitively.

Her gaze dug into me as she asked me, "Are you doing okay?"

"I'm fine."

She pushed further, poking at the secret of Karl hidden in my chest.

"Are you sure? I see the sadness in your eyes." My heart beat faster with each probing question. I could feel Karl's interest spark. He started to crawl out of his home.

"I'm alright, just tired." The tears collected in my eyes, giving me away.

"It's okay to feel sad, we all do, but there are ways to help it."

"Really, I'm okay." I forced out the word "okay," hoping it would echo down my throat and smack Karl in the face, pushing him back in his home. It didn't. Karl's spindly arms started to climb up the notches on my spine, creeping closer to my mind.

"I'm going to give you these forms to make sure."



I sat in the lobby of her doctors office, ticking boxes off forcefully. I continued to check off "several times a week" to questions that read "How many times a week do you feel like you're not able to control or stop worrying?" or "How often do you feel like everything is an effort?"

These questions felt too personal for me to confess to a checklist. I couldn't stop hearing my doctor say she saw sadness in my eyes. That was quite a bold statement for someone who barely knew me. My doctor had never told me what they were testing for, but the bolded words of "**Anxiety**" and "**Depression**" that glared at the top of the pages gave her away. I couldn't help but feel a bit offended. Although I told myself I had the utmost respect for people dealing with mental health, I still didn't want to be one of them. I didn't want those bolded titles attached to my name, tagging along closely after "Shy." "Anxious," "Depressed" and "Shy." That was my own deranged conga line of embarrassing traits. I didn't think that conga line following my name wherever I went would make me feel happier. So I denied those titles. Besides, I didn't feel like I had anxiety or depression. I mean, I had Karl, but he was just a tenant.

I thought if I ignored Karl he would go away. He would get bored of pestering me and try to find a new home with someone else. But Karl wasn't like that. In fact, Karl was a lot more like me: the less attention I gave Karl, the more he would demand. If I tried to block him from my mind, he would run up into my thoughts and jog laps in there until I was too tired to kick him out. My biggest problem with Karl was he knew me better than I knew myself. He knew what buttons to press when I was angry, he knew what thoughts to drag up when I was sad and he also knew how to meddle.

Eventually my mind became boring to Karl. Karl started to make up his own games to entertain himself. His long spindly black arms would reach up through my ribcage, into my throat, crawl around my mind and climb out of my ears. Now Karl could affect more than only me, his clawed hands had a hold on my surrounding world.

After a night out with friends, Karl and I would sit in my room and run through the events of the night. It was like the halftime segment during a soccer match. Karl would break down every interaction, play by play, and coach me on what I had done wrong. We would pick apart my conversation with Janice, remembering her tone of voice, seeing if she sincerely meant she missed me. We rethought out how I said thank you to the waiter, how my voice had come out awkwardly high and a bit louder than it should have. We sorted through all my friends goodbyes, seeing who chose to wave, shake my hand or give me a hug- deciding if that meant they really did want to see me next week. If I or my friends didn't reach Karls standard's, I would be benched for the next couple of weeks until he determined I was ready to go out again.

When I waited on the bench to go out again, Karl whispered that my friends were angry with me and made up lies of terrible things they said. Everyone stared at me, according to Karl. Everyone hated me, according to Karl. I was alone, according to Karl. Nothing was according to me. Karl wanted me for himself, and as soon as I believed his lies, I started to find comfort in his rigid cold arms.

Karl seemed to be a friend to me now; everything he told me was for my own good. Maybe if I did voice my mind, I would get hurt. Perhaps it was better to stay in tonight because no one wanted me to go out anyways. Karl was right, I needed to not talk to anyone about him

because it would be far too embarrassing. Karl stopped being an unwelcome tenant and became my roommate. I happily helped him move his things up from my chest and into my mind.

My nails pressed firmly into the green plush armrest of the chair and I counted the cotton balls in the glass jar above my doctor's desk. My feet dug into the floor as I tried to chip away at the impermeable tiles underneath me. A soft knock at the door was followed by my doctor sweeping into the room. I avoided eye contact but she found my gaze and matched it immediately.

"How are you feeling today?"

"I'm alright," I spat out the same answer I always did. Karl helped me hide the tears this time, pulling them back every time they welled up.

"Are you feeling any better?"

"Yes."

"How so?" I could not think of something to answer that question. I should have prepared an answer. I looked to Karl for what to say but he was silent. He didn't know either. The silence dragged out between us as her large concerned eyes dug deeper and deeper into me.

"I'm worried about you." I felt my eyes start to burn and my nails clench into the armrest.

"Are you worried about you?" I hadn't thought of this one either. I was worried about Karl, so much so, I hadn't really thought about me. I felt a tear on my cheek before I registered I was crying. Words tumbled out of my mouth before I knew I was speaking. Before Karl could snatch them back in my mouth and lock them away in the corners of my mind.

"A bit. I don't like being sad all the time."

I told my doctor I didn't want medication. If I had let Karl into my mind, I wanted to kick him out myself. I wasn't quite sure how to let him go - it was like letting go a part of me - but I kicked him back down from roommate status to tenant status as fast as I could. My mind decluttered as I watched Karl move out all of his possessions back to my ribcage. He still lived with me, but he was more contained there. I put a lock on Karl's door and added blinds to his windows to stop him from peeking.

I started to untangle the thoughts that Karl had woven into my mind. I pulled apart my thoughts from his, dissected out the lies and kicked them out of my head. It was hard to figure out what thought was originally mine or Karl's. The lines had become blurred between our thinking. The longer Karl lived with me the more blurry the line was.

At times I missed him. I didn't know who I was without him or how to react without his guidance. I don't think he ever meant to hurt me. I think he wanted to protect me from the world I was growing up to be apart of. As misguided as his attempts were, the life he made me live was safe. But the silence was nice. It felt like I had grown up and was finally old enough to live on my own.

Every few weeks, Karl broke the lock on his front door and escaped until I had the strength to catch him and put him back. I would have to untangle his arms from my ribcage, take my thoughts back from his grasp, put them back in order in my mind, and gently lock him away in his home again. I told him he needed to leave but I could see by his bashful look he was not ready to go. I don't know if he will ever let go of me. He might continue to live in my chest, planning daring escapes from his boarded up home like a little Houdini, for the rest of my life. Part of me doesn't want to see him leave. I would miss the chest pains.

by Maya Marino

How to Get Out of  
the Free Escape  
Room

### *Introduction*

Escape rooms have spread like wildfire. It appears every city, small or large, has at least one or two Escape Rooms for amusement. For those who aren't familiar, the concept is simple: you and a group of friends each pay about \$20-25 and are locked in a room with a particular theme (i.e.: Prohibition era New York City or 1920's Paris, for example). Within approximately 60 minutes your team must solve a series of sequential clues that will lead to a code or key that will open the locked door. The host of the escape room is available at all times in case of some emergency, and some locations even let the host provide a clue upon request. It's a fun time amongst friends and is also a popular team building activity for employees of a small work environment. Whether your team solves the puzzles or not you will be released, get a group photo done and return home safe.

There are free escape rooms available, but I strongly suggest you avoid them at all costs. Should you ever be stuck in a free escape room, please remind yourself of some advice in order to get out.

### *Part I: Genesis*

Getting into the free escape rooms is tricky if you're sober. You're more likely to land there if you are completely reckless from a combination of legal and illegal substances in addition to an unhealthy amount of booze. It might happen due to a party that's gone too far, or a fight outside a nightclub downtown, or from sprinting down a busy road barefoot because the extra hallucinogens you took make you believe you're soaring through the solar system. Yes, there are a great number of ways to get into the free escape rooms but as mentioned earlier, try to avoid the situation; use these tips only (as a guideline) should you

end up there.

### *Part II: The Way There*

Like Cinderella being whisked away to the ball in a magic pumpkin you too will have your own carriage to bring you to the free escape room. Complete with chaperones, the carriage is a curious sealed compartment with no windows. The shiny interior is mesmerizing or a complete nightmare, depending on your state of mind. It is cold but you probably won't even notice unless your coat went missing or perhaps a shoe fell off. It's a weird sensation to not know where you are or where you're going. The carriage turns left; the carriage turns right. You feel the declination of hills and try to keep your balance during sharp turns. The best way to enjoy the ride is to sit as close to the front as possible and try to be centered at all times.

### *Part III: The Escape Room*

After an unspecified amount of time in the carriage, which may seem like an eternity depending on how inebriated you are, you arrive at the free escape room. Like the amusement escape rooms, you pay money for your phone and other personal belongings to be taken away. In less than a minute, you're escorted by force into a room that resembles the carriage. The room is white and lit with bright fluorescent lights. The lights are so bright that you think you're at a tanning salon. There are no clues on the walls as they are bare. There is a cold bench made of solid cement. Or is it a bed? It could be an uncomfortable bed for a short person. Either way there's nothing inside, it's solid like a rock and chilly. The whole room is rather frigid, so remember to

bring a sweater. I'd estimate the dimensions of the free escape room to be about 10'x10' and the ceiling is rather tall, about 12' tall – basically it feels like you're in a brightly lit U-Haul storage container. Should claustrophobia set in after being in such a confined space as it does for me, the free escape room may not be for you. There is one small narrow window on the door, the only glimpse to the outside world.

*Part IV: The Others*

The free escape rooms often have multiple patrons who are also trying to escape in other rooms. Generally, you won't be bothered by those in the other rooms but occasionally their noise levels might flow into your own room. Your neighbours might be disturbed, mentally unstable and/ or just coming down from one or more drugs. Think back to your high school or college years when you experimented with many things: imagine having a wild drug trip and being stuck in some small bright room unable to leave. Intense. You may hear people screaming on the top of their lungs such as one of my neighbours, a young lady who:

“Shouldn't be here right now! My boyfriend drugged meeeeeeeeeee and beaaaaaaaaat me!! Why is he not in here?”, followed by a shriek at the top of her lungs: “LET ME OUT!!”, (over and over followed by sobbing).

See now, this really is not the way to behave. They're just trying to distract you on your quest and are most likely jealous in some way. Obviously, they're not going to release you so easy. Imagine how easy life would be if you could just ask for something and *poof!* it happens. You can't let their antics get to you and the last thing you want to do is yell back “shut the fuck up you stupid bitch” to anyone, this will only make matters worse. Try to fashion something into a set of earplugs. This can be your clothes all bunched up pressed against the ear or perhaps if



you have a Kleenex in your pocket (or toilet paper, we'll get to that later) you could roll that, moisten it with spit and slide it in your ears. Silence is necessary in order to concentrate on how to get out.

*Part V: Theatrics*

Countless days and nights of my youth I dreamed of stardom from being an actor in the movies. Although those feelings have subsided, I still pursue telling tall tales and performing spontaneous dramatic acts. There is an audience on the other side of the camera in the free escape rooms. Someone is monitoring you. To get attention you *could* try: 1) slowly getting up from the bed bench, 2) slowly walk to the direction of the door, 3) Pretend to stumble and catch your balance on the wall, 4) wait a few seconds 5) Dramatically fall to the floor as though you passed out. Be sure to be all spread out across the floor with at least one arm above your head. Any decent person monitoring you will come to see what is up. Do keep in character:

“What’s going on?” they ask

“Oh. Oh my, who is there?” you start to reply and attempt to look up to the window, “My medicine, I faint fast if I don’t take my medicine”. *Golden!*

“Will you have a stroke, heart attack or not be able to breathe without this medicine?”

“No.”

“Then forget it.”

Damn.

“What kind of ‘medicine’ have you taken tonight?”

“Ativan.”

“With booze? You know that you aren’t supposed to mix the two. What other drugs are you on? Your pupils are huge.”

Now I don’t know about your eyes, but mine are a deep hazel and appear to be brown under most light and yes, *appear* wide-pupiled. Yet, I wasn’t guilty as she claimed. Furthermore, how was this inane rambling to get me out?

“NO, I HAVE NOT” I broke character by sounding too strong and determined. You’ll want to curse at whomever comes to your door but it is best to hold your tongue. They’re being annoying on purpose: they know if they annoy the hell out of you then you’ll get pissed and start cursing. No one is going to give out clues to the rude and sassy patrons. Just get over it.

“Well at least let me go to the bathroom. You’ve got to let people do that around here or are we to sit in our own filth?”

“Ughhhh. Hold on and I’ll get someone for that”

### *Intermission*

Escape! Not quite, but it does feel nice to be out of the cube. There are no breakables on the walls, yet they insist on having your hands behind your back. Don’t fidget or struggle; you’re likely not as strong as you think you are. Do not look into the rooms of the other patrons. In a free escape room establishment, don’t expect a beautiful and clean washroom facility. They can’t even afford stall dividers, and there’s another narrow window on the stall door. *Pervert much?* At least the walls and fixtures are all shiny stainless steel. That’s kind of fun to be around. Do try and remember to fetch some extra tissue to use as make-shift earplugs. If the toilet paper is out insist they bring you some more. Say you have bloody explosive diarrhea and the rolls will come on in. Take your time and enjoy your break. If they wonder what is taking so long, say you are

constipated and need a long time. Wash your hands thoroughly with lovely clean water and soap. Then it's back to the room.

*Part VI: The Entrapment of Your Mind*

By now the honeymoon stage of the free escape room fades and a sense of cabin fever sets in. You're still at square one with no useful clues to escape and surrounded by people who are in no rush to help. In a Kleenex earplug induced silence you sit or lay on the concrete bed bench probably unable to sleep because it's so bright. Use another piece of clothing to cover your eyes from the brightness, but, this could further escalate the claustrophobic feelings. Claustrophobic feelings indeed.

You can try the door handle and see if it is still locked perhaps they forgot to lock it when you went to the bathroom. I tried but in vain. You'll want to lie on the bed bench and rest. It's so small, your feet will extend way past the edge of the bed and touch the bare walls. Then it feels like the walls are closing in, like one of those booby-trap torture rooms with long spikes in the wall from mediaeval times. The walls are closing in and the door is locked. Great.

Oh no, panic attack setting in. That is why I need my medicine. The shallow breaths, the racing heart, the sharp feeling as though you're about to drop dead then thinking about dropping dead makes the attack worse. Yep, it's a panic attack. There's only one thing to do: sit with your head between your legs and concentrate on your breathing. Describe your physical surroundings to yourself and remind yourself that you've survived before.

A new man peering through the window. You should be allowed one freebee clue upon request like in the paid escape rooms. This is hard work what with no clues, no medical attention and panic attacks.

“HEY”. Yell loud and pounce to the door followed by knocking on it to grab his attention. If they’re nice they’ll turn back to see what’s up as mine did.

“Yes?”

“How much longer am I supposed to be in here? What do I have to do to get out? Do you know what a panic attack trapped in a room feels like?”

“You’ll get out when you can prove to be a regular and functioning member of society who’s not at risk to hurt anyone or yourself. Look, just relax and calm down. When we do our surveillance rounds and see that you’re somewhat with it then you’re free. It’s that easy.”

Get out based on good behavior. *Bingo*. Why didn’t anyone tell you that earlier? Probably because they’re sadistic. Did I know this clue all along and was just not in the frame of mind to realize? Regardless, now you know. See, now aren’t you glad you didn’t yell at your neighbour or sass mouth the old bag who came to see your dramatic performance?

The clue brings a small sense of relief. Like you’re halfway home kind of feeling. You just need to make yourself presentable. Curl up all snug on the bed bench. Close your eyes and breathe. Try not to think of loved ones like your partner, family, friends or a cozy pet: you’ll want them there to comfort you and will become sad they can’t. *No one knows where I am*. I want snuggles and I need hugs. No freedom, *I don’t like confinement and hate restrictions*. Try not to think about it.

Close your eyes and pick a movie that you’ve seen a billion times and know off by heart. Close your eyes and play the movie in your mind from the beginning. This will take your mind off things and make you look presentable. It may even put you into a cat nap.

Part VII: Escape

“Alright, you’re good to go now,” a stocky man announces after opening the locked door.

“Really?”

“Ya, it’s dawn and we’ll get a big batch from the night coming in to make room for.”

“No kidding!”

“Follow me.”

It was fun for a while and an enchanted evening, but you best leave as surely there are those worried sick about where you’ve gotten to. A lady at the exit behind a counter sits with your stuff. She looks as though she herself has been in many free escape rooms or just hasn’t seen the light of day in years. All your personal belongings will look so wonderful and you’ll vow never to depart from them again. Your cell phone will have a billion messages. Concentrate on replying to the urgent messages and deal with the rest later.

“Do you want a juice box and some granola bars for the way home” the lady behind the counter asked and I sincerely hope she asks the same to you.

“Yes, I want a god damn juice box and some granola bars” I replied. *Finally, things started to turn around.*

“Do you have a way home?”

“By bus, I’ll manage. Where am I?”

“Hastings and Main.”

“Oh cool, thanks.”

“Have a good day. Bye now.”

“You too.”

The back-exit door is heavy and slams behind you like a dog nipping at your heels. As mentioned earlier, try and bring warm layers to the free escape room but if that’s not possible then so be it. It could be cold and frosty upon leaving. The sun may be just rising, and the chill of the night might still linger. Early hours are so quiet, hardly a soul around except the odd street person. What a great time to hear yourself think. There are a few major bus-stops nearby to choose from. I sat at one and there was a murder of crows on the telephone lines around me. I sat in patiently for my bus to take me home.

### Conclusion

As mentioned previously, use this advice if need be. The paid escape rooms are much more fun: you’re surrounded by friends, it’s about an hour or less, afterwards you get to leave and are free to continue the fun elsewhere. If you do get stuck in the free escape rooms, try to learn. I learned something of myself. On a basic level I learned that Ativan and booze don’t mix well together. Was that all? The crows at the bus stop were free to fly anywhere but they stayed and surrounded me, stared and cawed like a wise nagging friend. They are everywhere in the city year-round. They watch my every move and know my secrets. They can’t be fooled, and I had some explaining to do. Ativan can’t be blamed for everything: I learned about personal limitations, boundaries and re-found a basic level of respect for complete strangers. In some circumstances people are placed in free escape rooms for unjust reasons but most of the time it’s called for. Be grateful for freedom and be grateful that the duration in the free escape room is short. By the time I thought all this over it was as silent as a coffin six feet in the ground and then

my bus arrived.

by Arlie Peterson







## The Hill

He is the new boy at The Hill, a short walk-in-the-park overseeing the slow-moving Red River in downtown Winnipeg. He is a Two-Spirit with sharp cheekbones that radiate in a fiery red when shyly smiling with full pink lips, revealing a perfect set of teeth white as untarnished porcelain. Two long braids hang over his broad shoulders that extend onto a brawny frame draped in an acid-washed jean jacket, a general attire fitted to the fashion of 1988. He is seventeen, engorged with pubescent vitality, and this distinction gives him an advantage over the rest of the older boys at The Hill, as every car that cruises by stops before him before the others. It does take a lot of patience to be in forty below.

The boys are brave objects of lasciviousness and active nocturnal animals in the twilight in search of warm flesh on the street corners where they stand. They do not believe they are missed as others think of them as dead. They all died inside a long time ago. And as the snow slithers

with the rhythm of the wind across the desolate street that amasses with every minute on the frigid December night, they all wait for the next car to cruise by, to be picked up and be brought away into an empyrean world that does not exist for them and never will. The sundog of an iris-orange dawn appears, and they all pixelate into the morning sun, never to be seen again.

by Julian Edwards



### Sheep, Wolves, and Sheepdogs

Darkness fades into light. The sheep awake and gaze over their land. A shadowy figure lays dormant among the grass. Death has been here but the herd remains whole. The routine of the day overwhelms their thoughts and soon anxiety is replaced with hunger. Nutrition is provided, on time, as always. “We are the sheep,” they say, “we are important, without us there is nothing.” Vultures circle but they pay no mind to the sheep, and the sheep to them. The shadowy figure is removed from the land and from thought. They go forward in their daily endeavors, no cause for alarm, no cause for concern.

Late in the evening a new figure arrives. It makes itself heard, it makes itself known. The sheep are disturbed for they remember this noise, they wish it would leave. As the night sky ascends the sheep take their place. The day is complete and it’s time for rest. The new figure takes watch but the sheep shift their eyes, they

say, "This outsider is not one of us." The sheep drop their guard and drift off to sleep, they feel safe.

The sheep awake to disorder. There's trouble in the wind. The herd is incomplete. Some sheep are sickened with panic, others think of their hunger. There are signs of struggle. Earth is clung to, but death comes and rips it from their grasp. Nutrition arrives and their thoughts settle. "We are the sheep," they say, "we are important, without us there is nothing."

by Kent Kean



## The Refugees from Rakhine

No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.

– Warsan Shire, “Home”

Monir wakes up to Razia’s wailing each day. Her weary toddler arms reaching out for her mother’s comfort. But this morning feels different. It hits different. Monir is four years old and this is his last day in their shabby mud house.

As he opens his eyes, a sharp stinging sensation immediately blurs his vision. Razia is lying next to him and his gaze falls upon the petite silhouette of their mother in the next bed, surrounded by bright light. His clouded vision prevents him from seeing her charred body. Monir loses consciousness.

He is woken up by a sudden jolt. Velma aunty, their neighbour, has Razia in her arms. She seems at peace. “How unusual for Razia,” Monir thinks to himself. Velma aunty looks like she just had a soot bath and Monir catches a tear roll down her face as she notices him moving.

They are in a boat. A boat larger than his house, larger than any boat he has seen before in his little village by the river.

“Where is amee [mom]?” Monir inquires. Velma points towards the rear of the boat and Monir sees a blazing fire consuming his little village in the Rakhine district of Myanmar.

“Where are you taking us aunty?” he asks in a shaky voice. “To the lesser devil,” says Velma, as their boat sets sail towards the tumultuous seas to Bangladesh.

by Abhinav Malhotra