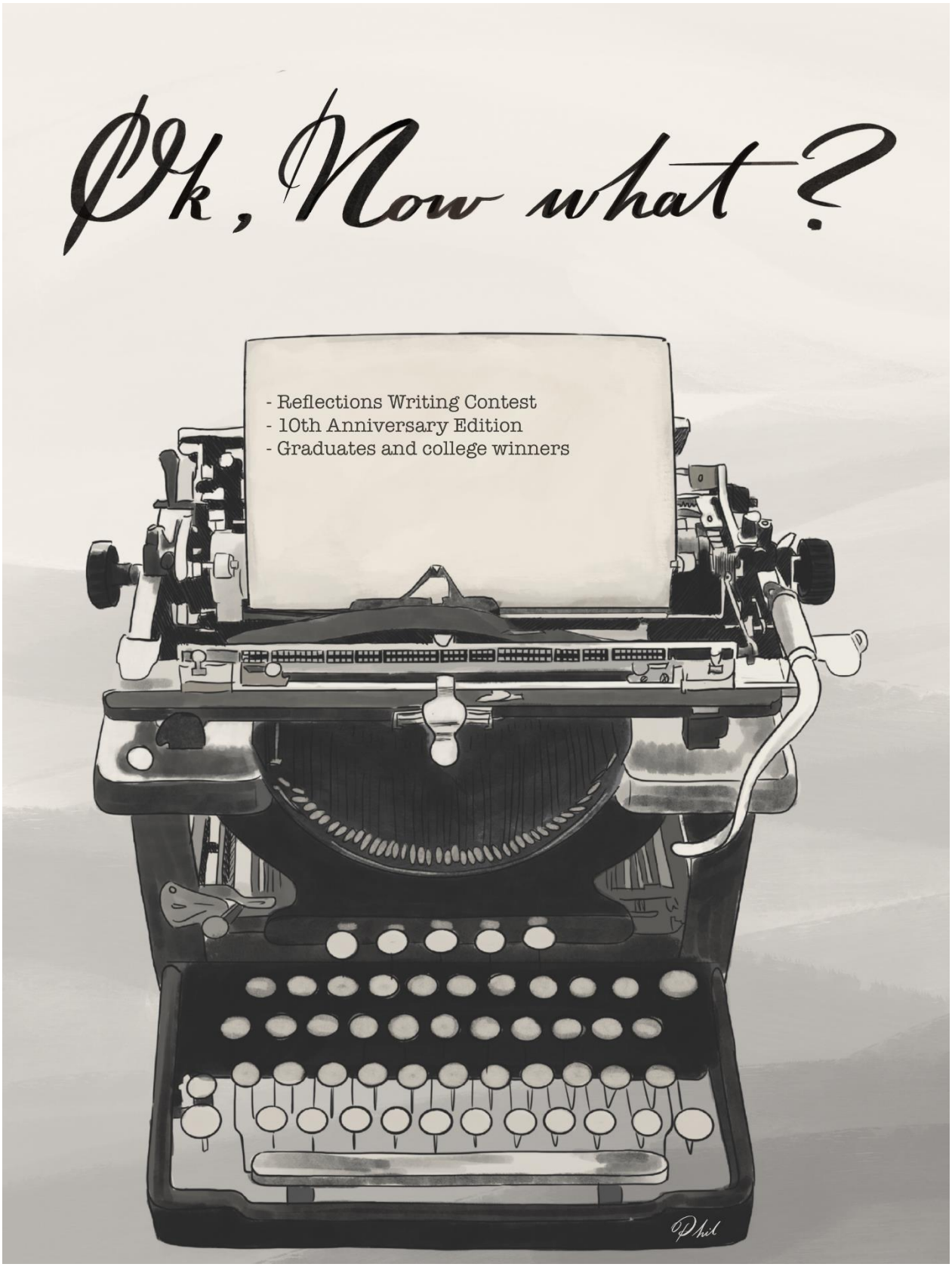
Ok, Now what?


- Reflections Writing Contest
- 10th Anniversary Edition
- Graduates and college winners

Reflections on a Decade of Writing

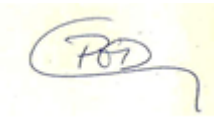
We are getting there, folks. Almost home, as it were. Perhaps a different view of home, certainly a different view of our neighborhoods, our schools and even perhaps of ourselves, but we are getting there. We have come through the past two years, scarred to varying degrees but – and this is a personal belief – steeled and better suited for what lies ahead. This year, we wondered **O.K. Now what?** What to do now that the veil (and masks) lift from our pandemic lives? Where do we turn? What do we hope to do? Students have responded to these questions with wit, bravery and impressive maturity.

The variety of the texts here is as impressive as is their quality. It is not all doom, though there is certainly some of that. Young adults are prone to the dark view at times, and they mine it as an effective catharsis, waiting for maturity to take. Hope, though, prevails with the realization that human connections are what count. Our graduates have stood tall in both number and style; meanwhile the college students continue to shine, several display a more defined writing style and voice as they contribute once again to the project.

Readers will note that at the end of each category the heading *From the Archives* where a previous text from the ten-year archives is drawn and highlighted. I think this provides a real sense of the enduring quality of the project and of student investment in it. Words of thanks appear within, please know that they are all heartfelt.

Be well,

Pierre Drolet



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2022 Reflections Writing Contest

Graduates Prose

1st place: Gabriela Correia Filardi

2nd place: Sunny Yang

3rd place (tie): Mena Henin

3rd place (tie): David Ji

College Prose

1st place: Alessandra Vincelli

2nd place: Felix von Veh

3rd place (tie): Angie Moshutz

3rd place (tie): Sylvie Giraldeau

Graduates Fiction

1st place: Wenhe Zhang

2nd place (tie): Xin Lei Lin

2nd place (tie): Le Cong Li

3rd place: Matthew Jin

College Fiction

1st place: Rita Zhang

2nd place: Taline Hajinzian

3rd place: Bahar Moshkani

Graduates Short Story

1st place: Christine Zheng

2nd place: Adrien Thibault

3rd place: Maxine Kang-Auger

Graduates Poetry

1st place: Lisa Chen

2nd place: Zuolong Wu

3rd place (tie): Tiffany Pham-Le

3rd place (tie): Nerissa Lu

College Intermediate Poetry

1st place: Elizabeth Powo

2nd place: Rosalie Pham-Le

College Advanced Poetry

1st place: Sneha Dey

2nd place: Kabisan Vilvaratnam

3rd place (tie) : Min Tu Chau

3rd place (tie): Marie-Ève Truchon

College Short Story

1st place: Nicolas Terzopoulos

2nd place: Jessica Xie

3rd place: Maxim Nejelski

2022 Reflections Writing Review

Graduates Prose

1st place

Guilt

Gabriela Correia Filardi

When I was four, my parents decided that South America could never be what they wanted for their child. They packed our bags and off we went to the land of poutine and opportunities that until yet, could only seem like a dream. We settled in quite nicely despite the numerous challenges thrown our way. We didn't fit in just yet, but we were willing to try our best to conform to the norms of these new surroundings.

Immigration can be complicated on a few levels for an only child. For one, you don't understand what is going on around you. All of a sudden, you hop on a plane, and you think to yourself that this is just a nice vacation. Except one week turns into a month, a month turns into a year and next thing you know, you can't remember what life was like before landing in this foreign country. You walk around and you don't recognize your environment. You don't understand snow, or why everyone here speaks a different language. You don't understand why all of a sudden, you don't see your grandmother or your cousins or your aunts or your uncles anymore. It feels like you've been abandoned, dropped off in the middle of nowhere with no support systems left in place. Alone.

For two, no one asked me if I wanted this. I didn't sign any documents. It just happened. One day, I woke up and this was my life. A life I didn't choose and oftentimes, a life I didn't want.

I believe my parents expect me to be grateful I'm here. In their eyes, they gave up everything for my future. To not be grateful to them is to spit in the face of everyone and everything they abandoned for me. But the truth is, I wish I could take it back.

What I've recently realized is that my reality with immigration is very different from that of my parent's. We didn't go through the same experience at all therefore we don't see our

relationship with this country the same way. Immigration saved their life, but so far, it has ruined mine. It cursed me to a childhood without family.

We are Latinos, family means the world to us. Except my family isn't rich. I envy those who can afford to go on trips to see each other every year, but that isn't my reality. By coming here, my parents knew that I would be kept from the people who meant the most to me. They knew it meant I would be estranged from my family, that I would lose all contact with them and yet, they did it anyway. To them, family was everything. To me, they were strangers. I don't know them, and they don't know me.

When my grandpa got Alzheimer's, I was the first one he forgot. I can't blame him; I am the family member he's seen the least over the years, so it makes sense why I'm the least important of his grandchildren to him. Even though he would never admit it, memory doesn't lie. I overheard my cousin telling me stories with our grandpa, like little habits he had that she remembers when she was a kid. Sometimes she tells him stories like that and for a moment, he remembers who she is. I tried for a really long time to remember a story like that to do the same thing, but I couldn't. Any valuable time I had with him was before I gained consciousness. Any time after that, I was estranged from him and then he got sick so it's too late. Since he was the holder of the memories of any time we had together and now he can't remember them anymore, it's as if those moments never happened. I look at him and I see all that could have been. When I'll cry at his funeral (which I won't even be able to attend because in Brazil, they bury you the morning following your death), I won't be crying for my grandfather, I'll be crying for the relationship we could have had.

You might wonder why I just can't pick up the phone and call my family. It's because I don't know what to say to them. My mom feeds them a carefully picked persona of an intelligent young woman studying at a prestigious school in a prestigious country with prestigious achievements. I can't bring myself to show them that it's not me, so I don't bother. I would just disappoint them.

I was supposed to go to Brazil this winter, but it got cancelled due to covid. Everyone asked me if I was okay, not too disappointed. I couldn't bring myself to tell anyone that in reality, I was relieved. Relieved that I could push back that feared day when my family would know I had been too Americanized for them. They would realise that I'm not Brazilian, not a Filardi, not one of them. But I'm not a Quebecoise either. I don't know what I am. I don't know how to fix this.

I’m not sure what to do now that this reality has been forced on me. I don’t know anyone who can relate to me. When I hear other people’s problems, I think to myself that this isn’t too big of an issue compared to that and that I’m overreacting. I should be grateful right? I’m the lucky one in this story. I’m the one that got away. I’m the one that got saved by Canada. Then why for the life of me can’t I feel that way?

Maybe I'm just spoiled. Too self centered and narcissistic to know what’s good for me. Maybe I’ve been ruined, rotten to the core. The selfish daughter my mom tells me I am. I’ve missed out on family and their support but look at what I’ve gained! I can leave my locker open and come back to my phone still inside at the end of the day! I can walk alone in the streets, usually without getting harassed. I have a shot to become a famous prestigious rich person and make my parents proud. It’s a lot of pressure but I have no choice, right? To fail at life is to fail them, it's to throw away everything they sacrificed for me. They did it all for me, so I owe it all to them.

Judge’s comment: This narrative essay offers the writer’s perspective on the consequences of her parents’ choice to immigrate to Canada when she was a child. Specifically, the essay carefully describes the resulting lack of connection to her relatives and of feeling stuck in a liminal space. Thank you for sharing your experiences and insights with us readers.

2nd place

Game Over

Sunny Yang

December 31, 2021.

New Year's Eve. Also the end of the world.

Announced in two sentences, twelve words, heard by everyone around the globe: "All servers will shut down in one hour. Thank you for playing."

What did this mean? For once, the gaming community was a step ahead, although it did not take long before everyone understood. *The Matrix* was right after all; we were just brains hooked to computers. The world was a lie, a façade, a fabrication.

At first, I did not believe what I heard but the reaction of Anderson Cooper on CNN left no room for doubt. He shouted two words: "carpe diem." Then he left in a hurry. Following his lead, the entire Times Square fell into a state of mass hysteria.

"Kshhhhh!"

That was the sound of my front window shattering. Some clown was unloading his rifle in the street. No one stopped him. On the contrary, some even joined him in his celebration. This was humanity's darkest hour, a return to the jungle. Laws no longer applied. In the face of hopelessness, all social and moral constructs collapsed. Reader, watch this: misstake. Sacrilegious. *Word* underlines my mistake in red but who cares about spelling, redundancy, verb tenses and anachronisms when you only have sixty minutes left.

Tears, sobs, saliva, and blood flooded every house. Two sentences had liberated mankind. COVID-19 was over. Climate change was over. The distant explosion of a nuclear warhead shook me as I pondered into the night.

Why end the world now? So much had yet to be discovered. We had only scratched the surface of the game. We were on the verge of becoming an interplanetary species with Elon Musk. Mark Zuckerberg was going to create his own simulation. How will the *Marvel Cinematic Universe Phase IV* end? I grieved in silence.

Dying at seventeen was truly deplorable. I did not have the time to experience mortal death or mortal sex. Hopefully, the next reality will be as convincing and enjoyable as this one, whether it is Hell or Heaven or another game.

I made myself a cone of ice cream and lay on my couch. Now what? The clock indicated twenty minutes left. I slurped my chilly snack and pictured in my head possible ways the apocalypse would unfold. Ten minutes. More blinding blasts can be seen on the horizon. Most of my roof has crumbled. Maybe humankind would end itself before the fateful hour. Five minutes. I left a final message in my mother's voicemail:

"Hi Mom. Happy new year. Hopefully, everything is alright at the hospital. I just wanted to tell you that it has been a pleasure being your son. This will probably not reach you but no matter where you are, I will find you one day."

One minute left. I closed my eyes.

Judge's comment: A fast-paced metafictional story about an apocalyptic New Year's Eve. How would you react if you found our that our lives and the world at large were all just a complex game? Read this story to see one teen's final thoughts.

3rd place (tie)

What an Evil Dilemma

Mena Henin

As the last tree has been cut down, as the final cubic meter of clean air is polluted, as the cruel hand that fate dealt us finally folds, humanity will wonder: "Ok, now what?" We, humans, are simple-minded creatures: we see no wrong in destroying the homes of our children, yet proudly advocate how our fancy electric cars are saving our planet. How do we suppose batteries are made? Could it have been from dangerous and pollutant lithium mines that not only rob children – of course, not our own children – from fulfilling futures but also refuse to believe these mines are leaders in pollution production. As for pollution and global warming? Well, the streets are clean, and it is very cold during winter, so it must be a myth. Seriously, hypocrisy is what fuels arrogance.

Yet, people protest, right? Are the masses not outraged at this horror of a life we live? Yes they are; protests for climate change have been popping up worldwide. But let us brush past the mountains of litter and cardboard signs thrown on the street in the wake of the event. The media does not care about it, so why should we?

When the dust settles, we will see what our own hands have down. Not one single person can be blamed: we are all responsible. Those who polluted are the cause, and those who did not failed to intervene in a meaningful way. Seeing a crime and refusing to step in is a crime in of itself.

But then what? We can blame all we want, but that will never bring back our big, beautiful earth from the brink of death. Twiddling our thumbs idly by seems like the greatest option. In the end, it is always better than having to look around in dumpsters to find edible food that has yet to be disease infected or radiation poisoned.

They need a hero with the guts and ideas to get them out of their sorry state of being, considering most are far too lazy to fix their own mistakes. However, the so-called man, or woman, with the plan will often use the peoples' helplessness to have his way, rising to power by gaining their support and using their fears and anguish. It seems that history would repeat itself in such a scenario, as it did a few decades ago with an Austrian man with a silly mustache. Trusting that laziness will eventually be the answer to the now numerous problems, selfishness and self-pity will reach an all-time high. In that regard, humanity will have reached a new low. Laziness and passivity will take hold. At that moment, humans will feel the result of their past selfishness and neglect of an otherwise imminent problem.

To a pessimist, all hope seems lost. The world will end, the planet will die, and we will be the cause. To an optimist, which many are, a faint yet hopeful glimmer is shining a way for redemption. To a realist, the entire ordeal is a political tool for control. In all honesty, only the powers that be truly know what lies in store for us common folk. In a meagre day-to-day life, one can never hope to accomplish much. Just like a fish swimming in an ocean current, ordinary people can only ride the wave that is either their demise or their salvation.

Judge's comment: The writer provides strong perceptions and contemplations throughout the essay, using rhetorical questions and manipulating syntax to explore our inaction and

excuses about the climate crisis. I appreciated the nuances in interrogating our seemingly positive actions.

3rd place (tie)

Okay now what

David Ji

I often ask myself why school grades are so important. It seems weird that people around me care more about my grades than myself. On one hand, my parents keep pressuring me and on the other hand, other parents from the “Coba Stalker” community constantly ask for the grades of other kids. Our teachers always tell us to stop comparing our grades and I hope that they will tell our parents one day.

Some adults use their child as a tool to show others their superiority. It isn’t rare to see someone say “My kid just aced everything, and he won the math contest. He didn’t really try. It was just easy”. Toxic.

They use those statements to show how they are great parents that prioritize education and success, but just look like a bunch of stupid donkeys. If you asked them how their child achieved those goals, they will be able to tell you everything, because they already fully planned the life of their child. Their children aren’t free. They must follow the path that their parents created for them to become “successful”. However, if you asked how much effort was put in and how hard the process was for their child, they wouldn’t be able to tell you. They only care about the results. Someone who tried but didn’t succeed is simply a waste of time.

Under the pressure of this toxic community, students are unable to perform at their best and find their own goals in life. Therefore, most people are just lost. They can’t find a goal in life because everything was planned beforehand and the moment their parents stop helping them, they have no idea what to do.

The community heavily affects the mental health of young students. Parents must stop planning everything and let their child have the right to decide the path they want to take.

Judge's comment: An honest and revealing glimpse into the pressures students face from their parents about the competition for high grades. The essay focuses on the effects of parents' expectations and how they lead to a "toxic community," an oxymoron if I've ever seen one. It ends with a strong call to action that we must all consider.

From the Archives

A Love Story about Climate Change

Swaeta Mir

This isn't your ordinary love story. It's a tragic one about me and you and him and her, about the decline of a once very-adored planet, the only known astronomical object harbouring life. The hate, the evil, the dangers that contains this little sphere were just about enough to perish it. The pain and suffering that those living in the depths of poverty have to endure contrasted with the one percent of people living in the most lavishest of conditions. The absence of education, potable water, security and respect has led us to start various conflicts, whether they're religious based or due to inequality. Our lack of love and trust and misunderstanding persisted. Humanity wept. Society nearly collapsed.

"For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten." (Ecclesiastes 9:5)

We are all bound to die at some point, whether it is in a car accident or a cardiac arrest or maybe even an unnecessary war taking place in the land you call home. Death is inevitable, however, when seven and a half billion lives are at stake all at once, there has to be a problem. Our anger is heating up our beloved planet. Our hatred and fear of the unknown, the rage generated from within us has led us to ruin the one thing that was handed to us by something far greater than we are. There simply isn't a way to recreate this place. No amount of money or labour will ever come close to replicating the beauty that this planet seems to so effortlessly exude. We tend to destroy the things we love out of passion and jealousy, primarily by being possessive and spiteful. We often ruin the good things in our lives because of self-deprecation and self-hate or because we are afraid of what we don't understand. We are so apathetic, so very phlegmatic towards the pleasurable phenomenons derived from the world. No wonder everything is in shambles.

"May your unfailing love be my comfort, according to your promise to your servant." (Psalm 119:76)

I hope that you find solace in

One of the seven wonders of the world

Where Siegfried laid his bare feet

Where he fought, and where he died

I'm not brave, but I'd do anything for you

I'd do everything in the name of love

Because what is a world without love ?

Without copious amounts of joy, of lust,

Of sins? Quickly went off on a tangent

About being unfaithful, wicked, glum

Morose and silent after the storm

I hope my solicitude has brought you infinite joy

In delusion, we will strive

"With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:2-3)

SCENE 1

A PRIEST OF SOME SORT. We gather here to unite these two concepts in marriage. Their decision to intertwine has not been taken lightly and today they publicly declare their devotion for each other. The intrinsic nature of this commitment is the acceptance of each other in entirety, as lover, companion, and a friend. A balanced relationship is one in which neither person is overpowered nor absorbed by the other, one in which neither person is possessive of the other, one in which both give their love willingly and without jealousy. This union is, ideally, a sharing of responsibilities, hopes, and dreams. It takes effort to grow together, survive hard times, and be loving and unselfish. With that being said, will you, Earth, lawfully unite yourself with society?

EARTH. (rotates in silence)

It never said I do. Our planet rotated silently in the most eloquent of manners, afraid of what the future had in stock.

SOCIETY. But I do. I promise to restore peace and love amongst society, to help those in need, to keep our land nice and green. I promise to stay hopeful when times are tough. I promise to love instead of hate, to understand instead of ignore, to be optimistic and glee. I know you are scared, but I promise I will be better.

A PRIEST OF SOME SORT. I hereby declare the union of society and earth from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do them part.

END OF SCENE.

“Do everything in love." (1 Corinthians 16:14)

While it is veracious that our world seems to be overflowing with resentment and bitterness and repugnance, there is some goodness, some form of gleaming hope and a predilection for elation and pure bliss, left. How else can we justify the feeling of being in love, in complete awe with someone? How can we explain the discoveries of illicit mind-altering substances that secrete excess of serotonin and cause euphoria? How can we forget our altruism and generosity towards those in need? The awareness and money raised for those stuck on battlefields, victims of natural disasters and equality? We certainly cannot rid ourselves of the beauty that different cultures, ethnicities, religions radiate. Our world, albeit riddled with evil, was filled with staunch people, with warriors and survivors.

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:13)

And maybe, just maybe, there will be a happy ending.

Judge’s comments: A creative and thoughtful text!

College Prose

1st place

Glass

Alessandra Vincelli

It is my window to different worlds, different universes with different languages, cultures, music, arts, and political contexts. It is my window to a world away from my own, as real as unreal.

The Internet connects me to people I never thought I'd be able to meet, people with similar preferences, people with who I feel a sense of belonging. I feel like I have a second home, one for a personality I didn't know I had until now, one that was hidden away. I teach myself languages to fuel my thirst for knowledge and my desire to travel. I read about historical figures and literary geniuses to ease my curiosity of the past. I discover places I only thought existed in the pages of fantasy and science-fiction novels and see different faces of the world I could see from my only window.

I can learn of real things, real places, real people, just as much as I can discover places that are too good or too bad to be true. I can see creatures that would never exist outside of my imagination, like dragons and giant sea serpents. I can learn fictional languages like Aurebesh. I can meet people in the corners of my imagination that fuel my daydreams, learn skills, and change my appearance. I can have blue skin or wings, be friends with talking cards or singing daffodils. I can learn about people that I will only comfort me through the light of a screen.

With time and age, my window starts to take on a light tint, that keeps getting darker as the time goes by. It's as if I start seeing a different place than what I imagined.

The world seems much different through the changing glass, more dark, completely different. I can only see those who seem so close, as the window neglects the existence of those who live a little further away, whose shadows mingle with the large silhouettes of the scenery. The picture seems to become smaller, crafted specially for me. I see what I want to see, understand what I want to understand, and the things I know start to become fewer. As the glass keeps darkening, my reflection starts to become more clear.

Or is it really mine?

It is deformed, as if each body part has been dislocated, removed, and then put back together in an attempt to make a better version, like a new cellphone model. My skin's been stretched, stained, stitched back on. My eyes are red from fatigue and dark circles stretch

down to my cheekbones. I look passed it, through my window, and see the others, with large smiles and bright eyes, perfect skin and the ideal body type.

I can't look at this anymore…

I try shutting my window, pulling the blinds down, but the window forbids me, as if it has a mind of its own. I can't look away from them anymore, these people I see through my window, those who, like me, are looking at the world through there own little window. And my reflection changes once more.

Judge's comment: This one got my brain working. To be honest, it took me a couple of reads to start piecing things together. I'm not sure if I 'got it' but I read this as an indictment of social media – in particular the lure of the echo chambers that stifle independent thought.

Like so much technology, the initial promise is wondrous. We are encouraged to explore, to create, to expand. But, through time, our focus narrows and narrows until the only things we are attracted to, the only things we read are the very same the very same things that support what we already believe.

2nd place

Viral Justice Warriors

An opinion column written by Felix von Veh

From insensitively integrating gender neutrality in legal documents to presenting empty-hearted land acknowledgments followed by national anthems, political correctness is quickly shifting into cacophony, rather than harmony, with the world. However, I must admit that it is practically impossible to be constantly woke, considering the dependance of "woke-ness" on topicality that cannot be predicted. For very brief context, to be "woke", according to Merriam-Webster, is to be awake, enlightened, and particularly aware of current political, racial, and social justice issues.

Powerful social movements, such as *Black Lives Matter* and *#MeToo*, have considerably influenced the evolution of what is defined as "politically correct". When such a

movement starts or is brought back to life, many will jump onto the social justice bandwagon to defend a movement without any knowledge about it. They'll simply do it because "everybody else is doing it, so it must be right," which dilutes the strength and meaning of a movement. This has recently been the case of woke-ness, whose virality taints its definition. People will act woke, without any considerable knowledge, simply to "brighten" their image and to feel better. Acting this way is probably natural. As social beings, who fundamentally rely on others, including for self-validation, we don't want to stand out or be different, fearing we might be perceived as "ignorant" — how ironic.

Social media platforms accentuate ignorance and represent a limitless virtual universe where information can be quickly shared and distributed with little to no filter. People will share a post to their followers, friends, and family sometimes without even reading what it's about or checking its legitimacy; this is mostly how misinformation, or even worse disinformation, is spread. One's sheer power of influence in the numeric age cannot be understated. Just like a pandemic virus, misleading media preys on "weakened" minds, inebriated by stress and fatigue, for clicks and shares to survive, spread, and prosper.

I believe we are all vulnerable to being that "weak" user — present company included. Whether we're physically or mentally exhausted or whether we just want to let our minds drift away for a few minutes, our minds are all prone to periodically being "weaker" than usual. However, this state of mind directly increases our likelihood of unwillingly spreading illegitimate information to an inherently biased entourage.

There *is* a reason that those affected by our ill-informed sharing are exposed to such information and follow us in the first place: they trust our intelligence and our credibility. Consequently, this increased confidence lowers their alertness for false information indirectly and comforts them into naively believing what we share: "This credible, authentic, and trustworthy person shared this information for me to see; since they believe it and shared it, I probably should do so as well." Thinking the opposite wouldn't immediately seem reasonable. Imagine questioning everything you are told by your boss, your teacher, your friends, your spouse, your family… It would be an absurd waste of time and energy that we understandably do not commit to. This behavior makes a lot of sense considering our tendency to be as lazy as possible. For example, consider the constant development of technology, that make our lives "better" and less demanding, sponsoring the global, rising rates of childhood obesity.

Another increasingly popular phenomenon is “cancel culture,” which, you guessed it, is thanks to social media. Cancel culture is the common practice “cancelling”: a public and engaged boycott of a person, generally because of something they did or said in the past or present. Cancelling has a primary goal of ruining someone’s reputation often with absolutely no regard for the person. If ever you were to be cancelled, which hopefully won’t happen, you can most likely say “goodbye” to your job, to many of your coworkers, friends, possibly even family. You can, however, say “hello” to online and real-world harassment, to possible financial and social ruin, and perhaps even to death threats.

As of now, many celebrities, politicians, and “regular” people like you and I, have already been the targets of cancelling. Some attempts fail, staining one’s reputation without being considerably affected by it, while most attempts succeed, some gaining massive online traction and ensuring absolute ruin for the “*cancelee*”. Cancel culture thus directly threatens freedom of speech. One cannot truly speak freely without the fear of being ostracized. Especially considering the Internet’s unforgiving nature of permanently storing *everything* that goes through it. In other words, once you share something online, there is virtually no way it can be nuanced, modified, or deleted: there will always be proof of what you posted.

I would like to mention — ironically, yet worryingly — that I am not defending those who have been, are, or will be cancelled for genuine reasons, such as harming someone. I need to be explicit and make myself clear because of “the fear of being ostracized” myself. Every cancelation is different and requires a lot of effort and adequate research to justify “punishment”. I do not want the end of cancel culture per se; cancelling someone is certainly justified depending on context. What I believe is that such a decision must be dealt with fairly. Cancel culture’s recent imprudent nature has fundamentally lacked proper reasoning, which I think has stained the movement’s reputation as derogatory.

In retrospect, cancel culture is fundamentally cruel: a person is accused, critiqued, and assailed with no decent opportunity to defend themselves. Imagine if justice was served this way: mere rumors could easily convict anyone, since there wouldn’t be any defense. Judges and juries would be unnecessary because there wouldn’t be any opposing evidence to consider. In a sense, cancel culture is a trial in which the jury, the judge, and the plaintiff are played by the same entity, while the defendant is silenced and forced to spectate their own downfall.

Cancel culture often depends on the spread of false information. A rumor, which is information, can quickly be circulated throughout the Internet, notably through abusive generalization and ignorant sharing on social media. Any decent-sized group of people can work together to manipulate facts and to take events out of context, creating a compromising dossier. When there is no chance for redemption or explanation, anyone can be victim to their own actions and suffer the inhumane consequences of being trampled by an infectious crusade of ironically self-entitled “combatants” of ignorance.

Judge’s comment: A very interesting, thought-provoking piece. The world of social media is so influential today that we must really think long and hard about how we are to better use it.

Like you, I am worried that people’s blind acceptance of information they see on social media is an incredibly dangerous. People seem to be losing the desire – or integrity – to research information. Once they find a view that supports their own belief, they pass it along without fact checking.

3rd place (tie)

The Last Goodbye

Angie Moshutz

Dear Mom,

I finally did it, I did what you couldn’t bring yourself to do. I left him. I know you loved him, but I couldn’t do it anymore, I couldn’t stand to live the same life as you, no matter how strongly you felt. I know it was your love for him that made you stay, but what if that isn’t enough for me? Scratch that, I know it isn’t enough. I thought that after you left, he would stop. I thought that after he beat you so many times, that he finally killed you, he would stop. But he never did stop Mom, I was just your replacement, a shadow of the person you once were; seeing me sparked a fire in him as if I were kindling to his anger. I don’t know how you did it, how you came home every day from work to try and put something together for us to eat, whether it was scraps of meat from our neighbor’s leftovers, or some bland pot of rice, which seemed to be the only thing we could afford since he decided money wasn’t a concern of his anymore.

All of that, only to get a couple kicks in the stomach or punches to the face if it wasn't exactly to his liking.

At first, it wasn't so bad. The couple of weeks that passed after you died were almost peaceful; we even watched a movie together. Granted, he fell asleep on the couch about fifteen minutes in and the sound of his drooling snores was so unbearable it drowned out the actor's play. Stale beer wafted over our one-room apartment in his wake, lingering long after he was gone. It bled into the walls. But I considered myself lucky. It could've been so much worse. And then it did become so much worse. It went from hearing doors slam so hard I could feel the walls tremble, to getting screamed at when his coffee wasn't prepared before he woke up, to getting the shit beaten out of when the lights were still on after midnight. He is your husband, and he is my father, but just because you chose him, and I have his blood, doesn't mean that he owns me. It shouldn't mean that. I am no one's. In two years, I'll be of age, but I've been fending for myself since you left me to rot in this sickening household at the age of fourteen. I wish I could say I wasn't mad at you, but that would be a lie. I hate you for leaving me here alone with a man who enjoys sending me to the hospital instead of helping me and protecting me like a father should. You left me here hoping that, what, things were going to change? I know you didn't mean to die, but, God, anyone could've seen it coming. He robbed you of your life force; you were still alive but had become a husk of the person you once were. Most of the time, you were so fucked up you couldn't get out of bed without collapsing into a lifeless heap on the floor. I can't even remember what exactly was wrong with you. Might've been the drugs, maybe the abuse, probably both. Maybe if we had left together, I could've had a say in my own fate. But what the hell am I supposed to do now? I'm a homeless sixteen-year-old with a dead mother, an abusive alcoholic father, and no education. Where do I even go? It's not like I have much of a choice. I'm pretty sure I have some deadbeat uncle somewhere who used to be your brother before he started downing bottles of Canadian Club. So, he's not even in the picture.

Right now, the only plan I have is that I'm going to leave this letter on the gravestone, as if you could read it. I'm going to tell myself that it'll get to you somehow, because pretending you can still hear me and watch over me is better than reality. Facts are that I'm alone; there's absolutely no one I can turn to, and it would eat me up inside to acknowledge that. I still hate you for leaving, but God, I miss you.

- Nicole

P.S. I really hope that there's a part of you, even if it's pitiably small, that can be proud of me for doing what you could never do: standing up for myself.

Judge's comment: This is a powerful piece, lots of hard subject matter and raw emotion. You capture the narrator's internal conflict very well, fluctuating between her anger at mother for loving a man who was so violent, and staying with him, and missing her mother so profoundly. I think this is a very accurate portrayal of the complexities of human relationships. Far too often in writing, emotions are simplified and idealized. Love and hate are diametrically opposed – which I suppose they are. But the dramatic conflict in literature (fiction or prose) is when those oppositions intersect.

3rd place (tie)

26 Hours of History

Sylvie Giraldeau

Sound is the only thing keeping her grounded at all times. Loud bangs, distant rumbling, quiet whispers. A constant flow of words through one ear to the other is the only thing keeping her mind in check, most days. You won't ever see her leave the house without her headphones on, blocking out the world around her and diving into the one she chose that morning. She doesn't need to rely on images to accompany what she is hearing. She only needs words. Her mind will do the rest. It knows how to build from the ground up, to align sentences like they are bricks in a house, pixels on a screen. It knows how to generate magnificent decors with incredible detail, lets her admire the textures of the world more than any photograph would.

She spends hours upon hours living life after life, witnessing stories unfold for better or for worse. Most days, she escapes into worlds where everything is possible, but, some days, she sits down, wraps herself in a nest of blankets, and listens to the horrors humankind perpetrates. When she closes her eyes, she sees pools of blood and tears, she hears the roars of canons and gunfire, and the wailing echoing in the distance when silence settles in. She shovels through the gutters, through the trenches, through the innumerable nightmares that mankind has allowed to happen. She sits through hours of retellings of violence and cruelty so that, when she finally opens her eyes, she better understands the harshness of reality.

Stories, whether they be real or not, are how her mind works. Historical facts created chain effects that explain her existence, after all. She wants to discover as many as she can. To see the consequences of all actions of the past as they tumble into the present. To dig deeper and deeper beneath the ground to see what comes up, what has been lost to time, what has been covered up with dirt and left to deteriorate over millennia. Words are her tools, as they offer so much more than she could ever be able to remember. Words watched her grow up, and what they taught her now allow her to navigate through the world and through the illusions built to deceive her.

She cannot live without those sounds, this stream of words. She is made of stories, and so is her memory. Of her own, of others', of history's. Small fragments that fit together to create a person. She is years of time spent listening, eyes wide and ears wider, making sense of what doesn't always make sense. Of beauty and of chaos, of the ups and downs, of what is fundamentally good and what is utterly evil, so that she doesn't have to fear the worse anymore.

Judge's comment: An evocative read, for sure. As a writer, I am equally enthralled by words, stories and history, by their power, by their weight, and the realities upon which they are built.

Given by what is happening in the world today, the second paragraph was particularly resonant.

From the Archives

Markus Brown

Margaret Zhou

Markus Brown. I often wonder what my life would be like without him. He's the very reason I wake up every morning. In fact, his 3AM wails wake the whole apartment building. But no matter how loud and tiring he may be, he'll always be my son. A single look at his twinkling eyes and his button nose is reason enough to tough through the hardships. Besides, it's only going to get harder.

Markus won't have an easy life. He'll be teased for being fatherless, and I'll have to work even harder to compensate for his loss. He'll need someone to show him the ropes, to teach him how to stand up for himself, how to make friends— the right kind of friends. He'll need someone to drive him to school to cook for him every night. Something that he likes, something that will be as delicious as it is

healthy and nutritious. He'll need someone to shower him with love, no matter how tough life gets. He'll need someone who will shamelessly shout and cheer for him during his soccer games while he shyly looks at his feet in embarrassment. He'll need someone to disinfect the scratches and bruises on his cheeks and knees, bruises he'll get when he inevitably fights with the other little boys. He'll need someone to help him with his homework, no matter the class, whether it's math, English, history, science or even German. I'll do it all. I'll be there for him.

I'll be there when he gets bullied by the neighbours' kid. I'll be the one apologizing when he, in turn, bullies the other neighbours' kid. I'll be lending him an ear when he gets his first crush in middle school. I'll give him tips he says he'll never listen to because they're too obsolete. I'll laugh in his face and be happy for him when he comes back, claiming that my advice worked. I'll show him my support when he'll go through his first break up. And his second. And his fourth. And his twentieth. I'll teach him that he doesn't have to date every single pretty girl he comes across. I'll always be there for him.

There will inevitably come the day he will leave me. A time when he won't want me in his life anymore. Because I'll be overbearing, overwhelming, overprotective. He'll seclude himself. He'll yell and shout and throw hurtful insults at me. He'll wish he had a dad. He'll curse me for being unable to provide for him. He'll hate that his life is so different than that of other kids. He'll resent that I could never give him what he wants the most: a complete family. And I'll be at the other side of his bedroom door, patiently waiting for him to let me in.

There will come a day when he leaves the house to go to university, to get a job, to start a family of his own, while I'll dwindle in a retirement home. He won't call much, even though he promises that he will. He'll forget about me until the holidays come around. He'll never initiate conversation. I'll have to reach out to him instead. I'll have to bear through the pain. I'll have to go through it all. But I won't regret a single thing I did for him. I would lay down my life for him. I'll do anything for him.

Because Markus Brown will always be my baby boy.

And I wouldn't trade the world for him.

Judge's comments: Margaret's story includes insightful and affective situations. I enjoyed the clever apposition, such as *I'll be there when he gets bullied […]. I'll be the one apologizing when he, in turn, bullies the other neighbours' kid.* The narrative slides into territory punctuated by an almost bitter and sarcastic undertone, then into harsher irony, until the narrator's emotional resolve finally resurfaces by the conclusion—it being clear that it had never left.

Graduates Fiction

1st place

Another Failed Mission

Wenhe Zhang

“Okay, now what?” asked Tom who, still crawling on his knees, advanced slowly in the ventilation tunnel.

“Go straight, then turn to the left. There should be an opening in the wall. That’s our first checkpoint,” commanded the voice in Tom’s headset.

The young man adjusted the device and, pressing on a button, said “Understood.”

The infiltration had started about an hour ago. It had been planned out for several months, with the team laying out every action to the second. Some initial difficulties arose from entering the secret passage. The identity card that they stole from a meeting did not open the gates. Tom was forced to use his laser cutter to remove a hole imperceptible but big enough for him to pass.

“I have reached the first checkpoint. Now what?” reported the agent.

The voice in his head responded, “Assess the situation.”

“The meeting room is empty. Enemies do not seem to be present. There are a few dishes left on the table, undoubtedly celebrations this morning. Looks like we are in good shape to proceed for the next hours.”

“Understood. Proceed to next checkpoint.”

Tom sighed. He placed his back against the cold metal wall and took out his favorite chocolate bar. Biting off a piece, the agent looked through the dark tunnel. Some hundred meters separated him from the next checkpoint. His feet and knees were already sore, but he must continue with the mission.

Suddenly, a door outside was unlocked. A creak resounded in the building. Tom heard footsteps and chatters that became increasingly louder.

“What’s happening? Who’s here?” asked Tom to the command center.

“It appears that two guards have penetrated the front door. They are moving forward into the main chamber. They will soon arrive at the meeting room.”

Tom panicked. No one was supposed to enter the building in the afternoon. He heard footsteps approaching his location and quickly shuffled himself to hide behind a door.

“I don’t think they know I am here. Now what’s next?” inquired the young man.

“It is unsafe to remain in the building. We cannot further proceed with the mission,” said the voice.

“But I can still make it. I just have to be –”

A loud shriek broke the silence and echoed in the building. Someone shouted “Tom” like a madman. Footsteps became rapid and deafening.

“They know I am here! And worst, they also know my name!” cried Tom.

“Tom, you are surrounded! They have found it! They are searching everywhere for you. Come back to the secret room now! I repeat, come join me! Abort! Abort!”

The agent moved rapidly and with lights step toward a stairway. He could not return by the path which he came from. Enemies will likely have blocked the hole. Just before arriving at the staircase, he saw someone’s shadow. He threw himself forward for coverage and, holding his breath, waited for the guard to pass.

When the footsteps died down, Tom got up and headed for the way upstairs. When he arrived on the next floor, he became hopeless. A guard was supervising the door of the exit.

“I cannot reach the exit! They have locked me in!” said Tom to the headset.

“I am searching for another one. Be careful! Someone is near you!”

“Now what?! He will see me!”

“The room to your left! There is an old locker room! Go in there, QUICK”

Tom dashed for the room, barely making it before the guard turned this way. He gently closed the door and lay motionlessly in the small room.

“Wait there for now. We will wait until their attention is exhausted to move,” commanded the voice.

Many minutes passed, although it felt like hours for Tom. The room was dark, and the air was getting thin. He breathed considerably but could not move.

When at last he communicated by the headset, there was no response. Tom was worried by this strange silence. He tried, desperately, again and again, but in vain. The agent was about to give the last shot when suddenly, the door was flung open. A monster with wide eyes and long hair stood there.

“TOOOOOM!” screamed his mother. “YOU BROKE THE VASE AGAIN?! Come down here so that I give you a lesson. Do you think you can hide in the closet forever? Your dad already found your brother in the attic with the headphones!”

Tom, now feeling years younger, cried.

Judge’s comment: The expectation subversion! A rather straight forward story, but expertly told. Another Failed Mission not only stood out from the other stories because of its levity, but it really benefited from it! Short and sweet, it didn’t drag on longer than it should have, the faster-pace nature of the story allowed the reveal at the end to pack a bigger punch. I was convinced, up until the very end, that there was a real spy mission going awry in front of my eyes. This story genuinely brought a smile to my face, the thought of the kids not only breaking the vase (again!) but also incorporating it into their make-belief world rather than figuring out how to fix it or own up to it really tickles my funny bone.

2nd place (tie)

The Cycle of Life
Xin Lei Lin

The sun came out. An alarm shrieked. My head turned. Life was beginning.

Wake up or you will be late! Rush or you will be the last! Work hard of you be at the back! The pack doesn’t wait for you! Exhausted? Repeat once more.

Every day, the same hassle, the same routine, the same life, over, over, and over, again. In our world, this is it. This is how it works…

"What are you ruminating about, Winston, get back to work, did you think that the brownies would cook themselves without the production chain!" shouted the underpaid resentful assembly-line manager.

The production chain, again. It seems like everything revolves around it. Make this, faster, or the production chain won't keep up! The production chain doesn't cease, the brownies, them, don't take breaks, certainly not for the sake of weak links, us, the people. Yet, where does that bring us? More brownies, cheaper prices. Cheaper prices, more demand. More demand, more brownies. Basic, isn't it?

"OK! Now what again? Winston! Back in my time, unproductive brats like you would have been ostracized… No, they would have been stoned, yes, stoned to death! You don't want to be stoned, do you? Then get back to work!" called the underpaid resentful unsympathetic assembly line manager. I was about to add a few more adjectives but decided that my brain cells would be better invested in controlling the agility of my mechanically trained hands.

With the precision of a worker that has been repeating the same tasks for the last 5 years and 39 days, which, coincidentally, was my case, I poured the flour for 42.53 seconds after the landing of the first grain of flour into the bowl, before mindlessly inclining the bag at 73° from the origin and sealed it with surgical precision. If only I were a surgeon… With such training, I am sure that I could've been one, it seemed that they are in grueling need of them. Then, I could have broken the cycle! Less surgeon, higher prices. Higher prices, more casualties. More casualties, more demand. More demand, more value to being a surgeon! Basic, isn't it?

Before having finished my thoughts, my hands had already algorithmically tidied the bag of flour, filled with exactly 50.0% of its original size, give or take the atmospheric pressure that could have influenced the shakiness of my movements. Once, the older leaders, for "eco" reasons, had changed the size of the flour bags, rendering them 80% lighter. Such horror was not to be repeated. Oh! How torturous it was, to see the fruit of years of work, simply being tossed away for fake "eco *no logic"* reasons.

Thoughtlessly, my legs had also made 3 steps, with 48.23 centimeters between each, while my right thumb had placed itself at an optimal angle. My middle finger englobed a two-weeks old
fresh egg, before fluidly cracking and tossing its eggshell into the garbage, obviously considering air resistance and the moon's gravitational field.

Three years. That was the time it took me to master this pianist-like elegant one-handed majestic gesture. What if I could have used that time to master the piano, I thought. Maybe, I would not be performing in this miserable grey factory room. For such great talents as mine, maybe I could have finally broken the cycle, more pianists, more… something wasn't right.

The soft egg yolk had landed on the harsh ground.

"OK, now this is new, are you trying to start some revolution down there? How dare you, Winston? Don't you know that every egg yolk lost is a dint in the company's profits? Such discrepancy is unacceptable, distasteful, inadmissible, and un… give me an adjective, right now!" commanded the underpaid resentful un -- my brain paused to think of an adjective.

"Uncool?" I proposed in a shy tone.

"Yea, uncool, that's it, you get the point! Stop that!" he shouted lastly, before returning to his fake paperwork, when, in fact, his brain was occupied by a bunch of cat videos playing on his desk computer.

Throughout the years, I had also mastered the *bow-lowly-and-lift- one-eyebrow-slightly in-submission-and-asking-pitifuly-for-pardon* skill, which came very handy at that moment. I advanced to him and performed marvelously this unashamed demonstration of gratitude with a glimpse of servitude. *Touché.* I had successfully flattered his few working braincells that controlled his arrogant self, which returned to me a smile, while the rest of his dead brain was concentrated on a cat falling due to a cucumber.

If only I were an actor! With such skills, I could have seduced the largest audiences! I would probably be touring the entire world, sipping luxurious wine, and tasting quality brownies! As my brain was satisfyingly imagining this incredible future, my arms had whirled in the air reaching with unmatched accuracy a bag of naturally artificial-tasting chocolate powder and poured it in a perfect rotational swirl. Such a dance could only be performed by myself, a virtuoso of powdery substances, an expert in the physics of milk-landing and the

doyen of the brownie manufacturing process. If only I could open my own brownies shop … I pondered.

Why not?

After 5 years, I had gathered all I needed. I ran the math in my head: I had just enough money in my balance to pay off a few months of expenses. I reran the math in my head. For the first time in years, I was late in the production chain. While pulling out a piece of paper, my hands started scribbling numbers. If only I could be scientist! I would… NO, I didn't have time to dream. Not now. Frenetically, I drew a diagram. Yes, this was it. This was all.

"Ok now what?" shouted the uncool manager. "If you are unhappy here, I would happily fire you, don't you know that back in my time…"

I stared at him, straight into his eyes. The uncool manager had now changed into a startled manager. I smiled, and for the first time in 5 years, I took the decision to open my mouth and, obviously, it had to be for a punchline!

"You can't fire me, because I quit first."

Taking a step out, I breathed the fresh air of liberty. I could now be the actor of my life, the surgeon of brownies and the pianist of taste buds. I danced home, savoring the brilliant sunlight! For so long, I had been living someone else's dream, acting in someone else's success, never taking any decisions, never choosing a path for my own, never being … me. I smiled and slowly formulated the first thought of my pioneering freedom.

Now what?

Judge's comment: I very much enjoyed the way the narrator conveyed the monotony of their daily work – the casualness with which they describe such intricate manipulations really nails home both the mechanical nature of the task, but also the narrator's familiarity with the job. The contrast between the job description and the narrator's fantasies speaks volumes of their boredom but also allows the reader to have an insight into what kind of person the narrator is. The way the manager's interjection disrupts the reveries lends to the pacing of the story and displays the narrator's annoyance at their comments. The Cycle of Life proves that the author has a great understanding of the dystopian genre, and the fact that the ending is uncertain in an optimistic fashion is a welcome change to what I'm used to reading. I also liked the use of

the word “uncool” but cannot find the adequate words to express nor explain the giddiness I felt it was used again to describe the manager.

2nd place (tie)

Unwanted Memories

Le Cong Li

The sky looked like a dome filled with the blinking stars at the end of the lighting rods of the skyscrapers around the town.

“Listen, I need it tonight,” Tenge heard a gaijin say in a synthesized voice with a stinging accent. He was probably one of the hustlers established in this country where the black-market trade created more capital than official businesses. Tenge was several ranks higher than these foot soldiers, he had been one of the top tier Hakka, one of the finest living cybercriminals. Had been… After one failed heist that got his client tracked and killed by SERN, he was excommunicado, rejected by the very people who venerated him almost as a god the day before.

Just like every day, a series of a dozen people were waiting in front of the izakaya. Some of them were salariman in groups of three to four about to grab a refreshing beer, a bowl of ramen and light snacks after a hard day of work. In fact, most people spent their day jacked in a headset with a bunch of intertwined protruding electrodes ending in a plug meant to fit in the socket anchored in the back of their spine, navigating in the cyberspace.

Out on the streets of Osaka, a Nissan Skyline with blue, purple and pink taillights followed by blue and red alternating lights and a loud resounding siren bolted beside the unwavering passers-by. Neon signs of stylized Japanese and broken English created a misty effect in the air filled with an odor of burning plastic. Massive billboards of the results of the latest robot sport matches and snow-white geisha were attached to the first two floors of the lively buildings. But nobody paid any attention to anything. Their body was there but their mind was focused on their optical nerve extension displaying whatever they wanted in their field of vision.

The drone-waiter dissimulated beneath the hologram of a charming young woman passed through the virtual noren, accompanying customers who spent their allowed half an hour in the izakaya. “Thank-you-fo-co-ming” A dramatic bow. The hologram suddenly changed into a man of a bulky build into his thirties. “Wel-come- to-the-sto! After some indistinguishable mumbling between the next customers in line and the projection of the ramen chef, they disappeared into the underground bar.

{Tomorrow_8:13 p.m._Shinkawa Izakaya_backdoor_job}

These were the words that had appeared in the corner of his vision, below the time, the weather, and his physical condition. It looked similar to any of the requests he used to get hundreds before, but since The Accident, his feed had been empty. He became nothing more than a street hood selling ice in front of the corner store. Last night, in his capsule where he couldn’t even extend his legs, he had woken up to the information directly transmitted to his brain that he received a message coming from a channel so empty he did not even bother muting it at night anymore.

8:10 p.m. Tenge pulled his hood back on and caressed the collapsible baton in his side pocket before heading for the rendezvous point. When he got there, the backstreet was totally empty. Silent. He drew his weapon and looked around nervously. It was certainly a trap.

A shadow fell from above on him before he could move. Everything became pitch black. Chaos. Nothingness. Eternity.

When Tenge regained consciousness, a blinding white light was staring at him. Distant whispers came to his ears. He instinctively got up like a prey assessing the danger. There was nothing in the room except for a table with two pills in a plate on it and a young Caucasian man reading “Nausea” by Jean Paul Sartre. His silky dark blond hair was parted on the side in a defined undercut. His high nose bridge supported elegant glasses inlayed in his face. He lifted his eyes without moving an inch of his body and greeted Tenge in perfect Japanese.

“Prior to inquiring me about your whereabouts, we shall not forget the formalities Japanese people are famous for.” He stood up, bowed, and handed Tenge a business card. “Pierre, at your service.”

He was taken aback by the cordiality of his interlocutor and introduced himself in the same fashion. “Tenge, professional hacker.”

SERN. That was the name of the organisation on the card.

“Your merit as a hacker came all the way to our ears in Europe. Our organization specializes in research about elemental particles and, by extension, time travelling. We developed a supercomputer that generates movements beyond the speed of light in atoms and allows the consciousness of the user of the machine to travel to the future. Nevertheless, it is not an effortless task, an experienced cyberspace traveler is necessary, hence our request for you.

Since we are considerate, we offer you a choice. The red pill on the table will allow you to time travel and the blue pill will make you forget about us, and the machine. You will wake up in your miserable capsule tomorrow as if nothing happened.”

“Well, that’s not much of a choice, is it?” Tenge walked slowly toward the table and swallowed the red pill. Pierre helped him branch himself to the supercomputer with an intricate headset and started the program.”

A tunnel of light appeared. He transcended time. He was time travelling.

After a few seconds that seemed like an eternity, Tenge came back from his excursion in time. He seemed to have gained twenty years in age.

The headset came crashing to the floor. Pierre fell unconscious on the floor. The blue pill disappeared from the table as well.

Judge’s comment: Unwanted Memories does a good job of painting a picture and immersing the reader into this cyberpunk-esque world, from the vivid descriptions of the environment, adding more detail that develops the lore of the world, to unapologetically using terms without explaining their meaning – leaving it to the reader to piece it together with context clues. References to known stories of a similar genre are always very satisfying to spot when reading through a story such as this one! The ending took me by surprise! Maybe I was slow on this one, but I only understood it (at least I think I did!) a couple of minutes after finishing my first read-through! Very good example of Chekhov’s Gun!

3rd place

The Boy who once was Hopeful

Matthew Jin

There was once a poor man who married an even poorer woman. They earned their bread on their little plot of land and lived from hand to mouth, without much joy in their world. But they had one pride in their lives, a child so radiant he made the stars pale in comparison. He was filled with hopes and dreams and could make flowers blossom wherever he walked. Ever since he was young, he'd stare in amazement for hours upon hours at the nearby blacksmiths as they worked their metal. Day after day, he'd watch his heroes and think to himself, "if only I could be like them. If only I could spend my days forging metal as dark as night, as crude as wheat, as solid as stone, into riches more precious than gold."

But it came to pass one day when the boy was making his way to the nearby forge that a famous goldsmith needed a few apprentices. To determine who would dwell by his side, he held a competition. The boy, who was no stranger to the art, completed every challenge in record time and displayed a show of finesse like no other. The only problem was, an apprenticeship cost a fortune, ten pounds of gold, of which the boy had none.

Lucky for him, a wealthy lord happened to pass by at that time and leaped in at this opportunity. "I shall pay for your apprenticeship," he said, "however, you must pay me back twice the amount for when ten years will have passed."

The boy, who had nothing to lose and everything in the world to gain, happily agreed and signed the contract with his blood. He thought to himself, "If I work hard, I shall for sure gain more than enough to repay this sum, but I'll also become a goldsmith by that time!"

And performed hard, he did. For two years, he poured his heart and soul into this craft. Day in and day out, he would only rest when eating or sleeping. Until one day, a new apprentice arrived. The new student fooled around hung around the bad parts of town, and the boy followed suit as he too went astray. When the fourth year came, they were so disobedient the goldsmith had no choice but to let them go. The wealthy lord, hearing news

of this and knowing he would no longer be able to pay, expropriated the plot of land left over to him by his father.

And thus, the boy, now all grown up, stood on the dusty road, with no job, no gold, and no hopes. Lost, with nowhere left to go, and only himself to blame, he stared at the gray, deadpan sky and asked, “Aye, and now what?”

Judge’s comment: A story that most everyone can relate to, it’s difficult not to feel like the boy who once was hopeful at least once in their life. The story accurately conveys the sinking feeling of not measuring up to other people or one’s own expectations, as well as the feeling of shame and regret that comes with knowing that – as much as we want to blame the new apprentice – we are ultimately responsible of our current situation. The description of the boy’s hopes and dreams at the beginning of the story really stuck with me: the imagery with the blossoming flowers perfectly conveys the image and attitude of a wide-eyed sweet summer child.

From the Archives

This Sheet

François Provencher

You don’t know what time it is but, by now, you’re probably closer to the next sunrise than to the last sunset. You’ve sunken so low into your couch, you feel like you’ll never stand again. You’re so tired. You’ve been reading all night about what is real and what isn’t. Your brain is filled to the brim with big questions you’re too small to answer. But you’re nearly done. On the table in front of you lies the only sheet left. This sheet. One more text to read and you can finally go to sleep.

Yet you don’t feel like picking this sheet up. It’s not that you don’t have the energy; the sheet is well within arm’s reach and you could easily take it, read it in fifteen minutes, decide with a flick of your pen if it wins your writing contest or not and go to bed at last. You’re just not in the mood anymore. Those other students’ pieces on reality have messed you up. What is real? Are *you* real? That’s all you can think about.

Is this sheet even real? The more you think about it, the more you stare at it, the further the answer seems from you. Sure, you can see this sheet. You could also touch it right now. You could

bring it to your nose and smell the ink on paper, or crumple it next to your ear and hear the sound it makes. You could even tear off a piece to put on your tongue and taste.

But what happens when you do none of that, when you neither taste, hear, smell, touch or even see this sheet? Is it still there? Or did it only exist because you could perceive it in some way?

You close your eyes and try to imagine this sheet, still there despite you not looking at it, unchanged and real. Existing.

You can't do it. It scares you. You have the horrible feeling that, by closing your eyes, you stopped this sheet from existing, that you stopped everything around you from existing. You can't help but think the the whole world is just what you see of it, that it goes only as far as your senses. That would mean that the entire universe, at the moment, is just white noise and blackness.

You open your eyes again and it feels like swimming back up to the surface after an especially deep dive. The room is there. Everything is there. This sheet is right in front of you. It exists again. You're a bit less alone.

Yesterday, it scared you how big the world was. Now, what scares you is how small it could really be. You think of all the things that are currently out of the reach of your senses. You think of your children, sleeping upstairs, and pray that your theory is wrong and that they don't depend on you to exist, that they don't vanish into nothingness as soon as you look away. You couldn't bear to be more important than them. You feel the urge to go to their room and look at them, to make sure that they're part of the world. But that would be absurd.

Stop thinking, you tell yourself. You'll go mad. You're just exhausted. You're not the eye of the world. You're not the world.

You lie down on your couch. You'll go to sleep and maybe tomorrow, you'll have forgotten this. But the feeling follows you to your dreams.

As you slowly close your eyes, the world becomes smaller and smaller until it's barely anything. Everything you'd been seeing, touching, hearing, smelling, tasting, everything goes backstage to have its break from existence.

This sheet is among the disappeared. It's no longer part of the world. This sheet is nothing.

You could have saved it, however. It could've been with you, right now, preserved in existence. You just had one thing to do.

Read it.

Judge's comment: Provencher writes convincingly about both ends of the writing process. The doing and the reading. Strong writers are avid readers.

College Fiction

1st place

The Nocturne of Enmity

Rita Zhang

"Do not trust the crows," she said. *"Do not trust the crows, for they bring calamity upon you."*

Alistair never understood why his grandmother had warned him against the birds cloaked in midnight feathers. He only knew about their atrocious reputation within his neighbourhood.

Alistair was like that too. Birds of the same feather flock together, after all.

The mysterious woods near Babushka Oxana's little cottage housed many malicious creatures, or so the boy had heard. She desperately tried to keep him away from the mist-clad thicket. Unfortunately for the strange old lady, her grandson had a rather impulsive streak.

"Okay," Alistair wheezed. "Now what?"

He was lost—very lost. It was as if the forest had shuffled itself in the blink of an eye, purposefully trapping the boy in its thorny claws. From his position, he could see the amber glow of the sky peeking through the thick foliage, the warm rays of Sol mockingly urging him to follow suit.

How long has he been in this forest? The bushes' grabby hands tugged on his clothes at his every step, tearing bits and pieces of his school uniform to decorate their branches. The cool autumn breeze nipped at his cheekbones and weaved through the thicket like the ghosts of the dead trees.

"Shit." He threw punches at the air in agitation. "Shit… Shit! Where am I?"

A loud caw answered. "Where do you think you are?"

Alistair jumped. "*Holy*…! Wha- who are you?" he cried out. A flap of wings answered back.

The young boy ran to catch up, ignoring the pain that plagued his muscles. The cyclical flutter of the bird echoed in his head and synchronized with the rapid thumping of his heart. The trees melded into a single blurry image, each trunk and twig scraping at Alistair's twitching limbs. What an idiot he was: Alistair laughed at his impulsiveness. If only he had taken Hansel and Gretel's tale seriously, he would have already arrived back home from this adventure.

Home. Sheltered by the countless bottles of dried plants and reptilian appendages, raised by the dusty shelves filled with old books.

Little Alistair had taken a liking to the small jar of colourful pebbles his grandmother had stashed in a corner. "I got these a few decades ago from an ex-friend of mine," she had said. "They claim that the sea glass is authentic, but I have never visited the beach before. I don't know what to make out of it except for jewelry and charms, so I suppose you can have it."

They were beautifully dull, just like his grandmother's eyes. Round and perfectly weathered, Alistair had called them "Babushka's tears" until the pretty girl sitting next to him in third grade deemed him creepy. The jar of sea glass was cast aside the same night.

Alistair didn't enjoy getting picked on, especially when it came to the crows next to the cottage. Their beady eyes followed his every movement, piercing through the boy's intricately fabricated smile. Babushka Oxana's admonitions followed him like the flock of onyx birds every time he left the house. "Do not trust the crows."

Such tricksters they were. The birds enjoyed wrestling Alistair for the treasure he kept on him during his youth. They pecked at his skull, pulling on his short hair and school uniform until he surrendered. The jar of sea glass was half empty by the time Alistair stopped carrying it everywhere he went. It was always the sea glass, never his lunch nor his snacks. Little Alistair had gone crying to his grandmother after another attack.

"I'm so sorry." Her grip was suffocating. "It's my fault. Please, stay away from them."

It was the first time he saw Babushka Oxana weep. Her jewel-like tears soaked his plain T-shirt. She never elaborated any further.

He tried to dismiss the crow, but who else to rely on in this forest? There was not a single kind soul that would help him. Misty apparitions only passed through him, laughing at

his misfortune. The little raccoons taunted him with their playful squeals, merging with the obscurity.

Alistair ran until he could no longer hear the rhythmic beat of the crow ahead. Slowing down to catch his breath, he eyed his surroundings.

A lone crow danced around in a serene meadow. The moon overlooked the one-bird show, spectating in the audience with the stars. Fluorescent flowers as beautiful as his stash of sea glass speckled the lush grass—the runway to center stage.

The starlet stopped their little frolicking, slowly turning around to look at Alistair. They silently beckoned him to join in for a timeless *pas de deux*, to humour the skies that caught wind of the fable of deception.

An opulent dance in five acts. The contract in the wealds. The mundane days. The breach of a pledge. The resentment of an ally. The inexorable retribution.

A few eons away, a crash could be heard. The pendulum struck thrice in the dead of night. Babushka Oxana stood still in her living room, speechless, while the broken teacup pieces formed a constellation of porcelain on her wooden floors.

“What will you do now, Oxana?” The voice of an ex-friend called from the windowsill, shaking their wings and grooming themselves haughtily.

The jar of sea glass was empty save for a single obsidian feather.

Judge’s comment: A really beautiful, haunting story, Rita. So layered and evocative. The kind of story that invites multiple readings because there are new things to discover with each reading. This is a challenging read – like the forest, it is dense and doesn’t give up its secrets easily. The imagery is captivating – the forest shuffling itself, the broken tea cup forming a ceramic constellation, the grabby bushes, the jar of sea glass that, in the end, seem to run out like an hourglass.

Personally, I love stories that don’t deliver overt messages, stories that leave it in the hands – and minds – of the reader to interpret. For me, it was a tale of magic and mythology. Babushka Oxana – whose house stored jars of all sorts of odd things and “malicious

creatues” – had some sort of supernatural relationship with the crows.

Lovely writing, powerful story telling.

2nd place

Happy

Taline Hajinzian

He'd always been an obedient kid. He always did what his parents told him to. I say "parents" because while his stepmother was at home beating him for not correctly answering a simple French question at the age of 8, his biological father was either at his night job striving to put food on the table, at home quietly yet regretfully watching his second wife yell at his son and pull at his ears, or defending her. Although he was not lonely, he felt that way most of the time. None of his friends lived close by. He'd had to resort to bottling up his own emotions. To relieve the pain of being called names, all kinds of terrible names, he would always go up to the bathroom to hit himself on the forehead 7 to 10 times and use all his might to try and pull out his own hair. However, his ginger hair was probably the strongest part of himself. It was almost a limb. It never cried, yelled, or hurt; it just grew until he would decide to cut it. Even then, it wouldn't shriek or wet its cheeks, it would just keep on growing. And grow it did. His growing hair had had to witness and absorb the same painful words and accusations as he had had to. However, through it all, he'd always remained an obedient son. And his hair never moved an inch.

He'd always been an obedient kid. He always did what his parents ordered him to. After a certain while, after he reached the peak of his emotional growth at the age of 15, depression became a constant in his life. It's not anymore. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt genuinely happy and free. Sure, being with his friends at school did bring out the joker in him, but back home, his lips knew no smile, his brain knew no calm, his senses knew no break. He was constantly on the edge of his seat, waiting for a hit on the cheek by his stepmother to pull him out of his trance. Life at home was the least eventful when he was alone, and he liked things that way. As soon as another soul made its way in, he felt heavy, as if the air was filling up with methane suffocating him until his last breath seeped out of his body. However, through it all, he'd always remained an obedient son. And his hair never moved an inch.

He'd always been an obedient kid. He always tried to achieve what his parents expected of him. To "encourage" him to succeed during finals season, they would threaten to take everything away from him, including his friends, his phone privileges, his money he had worked so hard to earn, his school computer they had gifted him with as his high school

graduation present. A beating was implicit. When they did so, he listened carefully, nodded his lowered head and shamefully made his way up to the bathroom to hit himself on the forehead 7 to 10 times and use all his might to try and pull out his own hair. His ginger hair stayed put every single time. Not one strand of hair in sight. Ever. He would've been able to know it immediately if one had fallen off, as his hair would glimmer under the yellow sun rays piercing through the bathroom window, almost like Rapunzel's. He was almost annoyed at how much more resilient his hair was than his will to live. Quietly, he would then head to his room to prepare for his finals. He was so diligent, but his diligence was sometimes not enough to meet his parents' expectations and, hence, prevent them from keeping their promise. Out of self-spite and self-pity, he would starve himself, blaming himself for having forced his parents to act the way they did. When he would make it through 3 days of starvation, he would pat his own head as an act of self-appreciation. He had no siblings, no one to pat his head. He was alone within his own family. Since he had no one to protect him, he'd always had to rely on himself to survive. Surviving is not living. I know that now. And yet, his hair never moved an inch.

His hair now glows day and night now that he is in the light. He may have thought that he was alone in his hardships, but I had always been there, watching him struggle, and struggling with him; watching him cry, and crying with him; watching him try to ruin his beautiful hair, and always putting his hair back together, which, now I know, made him envious of it. It pained me to be invisible to him. I had known him my whole life, and yet he had never even known of my existence. I had originally named him Happy, hoping he would make his name proud. As soon as he came to be, I ceased to be. And yet, I have watched along for the past 18 years as this poor boy has known nothing but pain. It's as if I had passed along my misery to him. Childbirth is no easy feat for a helpless 17-year-old girl.

Judge's comment: This is a powerful story, Taline. Not an easy read because of the subject matter, but a moving story well told. Some of the details are incredibly poignant – like patting himself on the head because there was no one else to do it.
I very much liked the repetition of the first three paragraphs. I liked the progression of what his parents told, ordered and expected him to do. The repetition made it feel almost like he was trapped in this abusive loop, unable to escape.

The last paragraph, totally unexpected, was well delivered, introducing his tragic guardian angel – his mother, who died during childbirth.

3rd place

Auction

Bahar Moshkani

Facebook: Hello, everyone. I welcome you to the auction of Bahar Moshkani, an 18-year-old from Montreal. This is an exclusive auction to the most important members of the media. Is everyone ready?

Netflix: What exactly is being auctioned?

FB: Her time, her attention, her thoughts, her interests, her imagination, the way she speaks and holds cups. Other questions?

Snapchat: What do we have to give in exchange for all that?

FB: You have to make sure that she is kept entertained at all times. You have to make sure to be accessible at all times. She cannot hold a conversation for longer than 10 minutes. Therefore, once her battery runs out, it's your turn to keep her company and make her feel that her incapacity of upholding a normal conversation for more than 10 minutes is quite normal. As well, she appears to not know who she is. Thus, you also have to form her personality for her. Is that clear for everyone?

YouTube: So, in short, we have to entertain her, build her a personality, and comfort her in moments of weakness. Did I get it right?

FB: Yes. Precisely. Since I will never have a chance to win, I will be the one hosting this auction. Are we finally ready? Instagram?

Instagram: Yes!

FB: Snapchat?

SC: Yes!

FB: YouTube, Netflix and Co?

YT, Netflix and Co: YES!

FB: Spotify? Ao3? Other… media?

Spotify, Ao3, other… media: Of course.

FB: And, finally, TikTok?

TikTok: Let's get started. You're taking too long. I can only give you 3 minutes of attention **MAX**.

FB: Alright then. Here we go. Starting off with her time. Who wants that?

TT: I'll take that.

FB: Alright! We have our first bidder. Anyone else?

Everyone remains silent.

FB: TikTok gets her time, then. Now, who will be the lucky bidder to get her attention?

TT: I'll take that.

Insta: I want that too.

TT: How are you going to keep her entertained? All you've got are pictures and copies of videos I make. You are unoriginal, uninspired, and plain boring.

FB: We do not condone bullying here. Please stop or I will have to ask you to leave.

TT: What are you going to do? Support your sibling, here? I know you and Instagram are related; you can't fool me.

FB: Well, what are you offering?

TT: I'll show her short and relatable videos that will always grab her attention and make her feel she has not wasted her time. She'll love that.

FB: Instagram?

Insta: I'll offer her pictures and stores and videos and-

TikTok: Stolen videos.

FB: I'm sorry, but TikTok also takes this one. Next, it's going to be her thoughts and interests. These two are a package deal.

YT: Why is that?

FB: It helps form her personality. If they're too contrasting, she'll glitch and be a defect. So, who wants it?

TikTok raises its hand.

FB: No one else? *Silence.* TikTok gets this one as well.

SC: I don't even know what I'm doing here. All I allow her to do is talk to her friends. She has a total of two of them. I'm going to leave. My talents will be wasted here.

FB: It was nice to have you with us, Snapchat. Have a nice day. Now, as for her imagination, we'll be demanding two media to share this role. This is a big shoe to fill. So, to remove some of that burden, we'll give it to two media.

Netflix and Other… media look at each other and then TikTok. It seems to be quiet.

Netflix and Other… media: We'll take that one.

FB: Other… media, what will you be offering?

OM: Legally, I'm not allowed to say. Let's just say that Netflix and I are very similar. But allegedly, I offer shows that Netflix cannot.

FB: I see. Anyone else? Perfect! You two get this one.

Spotify: I would've liked to get that.

N: Why didn't you fight for it then?

S: I'm not sure. I think I'll make a deal with TikTok. It's ravaging through these categories I'm sure I could be of help.

TT *to OM and N*: We should team-up. I'll give her new interests, and you two take care of that and vice versa.

NF & OM: For sure. We'll get our people to call your people.

AO3: TikTok, may we also collaborate?

TT: How would you like to do that?

AO3: You give her suggestions from my website. Give her good depressing suggestions, and she'll keep running back for more. We'll both get more attraction that way.

TT: You are right. Let’s do that.

S: Can I get in on that too? That EXACT deal. I know I can be of service, just please give me a chance.

TT: I was actually going to ask you whether you’d like to team up.

S: You thought of me?

TT: Of course. You are extremely important to me. I would never forget about you.

OM: What is going on…

Spotify starts playing Careless Whisper

N: Now that I think about it, those two came in together.

Insta: Wait, are you serious?

N: Yeah. What if TikTok is buying all of these to satisfy Spotify?

Insta: Wait…

FB: Who wants the way she speaks?

TT: I’ll take that.

Insta: There’s no way you can afford that.

TT: You’d be surprised. No one else is bidding, so why hesitate?

FB: You get that too, I guess.

OM: What if Spotify is behind all this?

N: What do you mean?

OM: What if Spotify is cheap and can’t buy all these. So, it’s making TikTok get them so they can have total control. This way, they’ll dominate the girl forever.

Insta: Oh, my God.

FB: Last but not least is the way she holds her cups.

OM: I know someone who can take care of that. I’ll take that one.

FB: I find that odd, but you get this one as well.

OM: Yes!

FB: Dear media, this is all for today. TikTok, Netflix and Other… media, Bahar thanks you for your effort to build her a personality, occupy her time and make her feel better about herself. You may all go home now. I'll inform her of her new occupiers.

TT: I'll be expecting her to stop by in the next couple of minutes.

FB: Of course, she'll be there soon.

Bahar: What's going on? Why is Careless Whisper playing?

Scene.

Judge's comment: As a father of two teenage girls and a 10-year-old boy, I very much enjoyed this story. Screens and social media are the biggest sources of discussion, debate and, sometimes, arguments in our home.
Being a man of a certain age, I am a Facebook user and that's about it. I have a vague understanding of Tik Tok and Instagram, etc. Your story gave me more insight into these other platforms.
I really liked how you brought to life the various social media platforms. The personifications of each seemed – at least to my untrained eye – an accurate representation of how each one appeals to specific needs of the user.

It was funny in parts, particularly how the platforms squabbled with each other. But it was also sad how she needed these platforms to "form her personality", sad how she couldn't carry on a conversation for more than 10 minutes. You really tapped into every parent's deepest fear when it comes to social media.

From the Archives

Below the Ceiling

Fairy Tales 2018 - Blank Space
Juan Fernández González

The city of Subne was known for the megastructure that hovered above it. Known as the Ceiling, it could have been described as a floating surface made up of countless adjacent boxes. It covered the entire city like a translucent blanket, filtering different shades of orange and pink.

It followed one rule: *The Ceiling grew upward over the places where people walked.* The growth was as slow as the growth of the trees, only noticeable after several years.

This rule had shaped the megastructure since the arrival of the first settlers. Its highest parts were above the public spaces like plazas, gardens and roads, since people walked there the most. There, the trees could grow ceaselessly, the birds could fly freely, and the buildings had no height limit. The lowest parts of the Ceiling were the least explored areas: the outskirts of the city. There, the trees growth was restricted, few birds could be seen, and the buildings were either short or non-existent.



This megastructure echoed the movement of the people below it, immortalizing their everyday walks, their occasional moments of exploration and their secret promenades. Described as a collective monument, it was the greatest source of pride for the people of Subne. Because of it, the city was an exception to the paradigm of the city skyline. Elsewhere, the highest landmarks were churches, castles, palaces or government buildings, which belonged either to the richest or to the most powerful. In Subne, the highest points of the Ceiling were above the public spaces which belonged to the people.

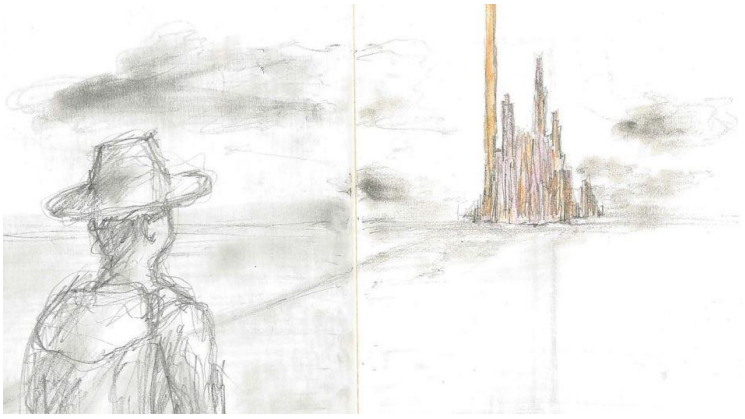
The shape of the Ceiling had a major impact on the way society worked. Their culture turned around the idea of following the paths of the first settlers, made visible thanks to the megastructure. The people

would walk under the highest parts of the Ceiling, proudly following the footsteps of their ancestors, who had bravely ventured into an unknown land. On the contrary, walking under the lowest parts of the Ceiling was considered a sacrilege. These spaces were meant to be untouched, respecting the will of the first settlers. Few people wandered off the roads that led to the outskirts of the city and beyond.

This created a never-ending cycle. People walked under the highest parts of the Ceiling, which became even higher, while the lowest ones remained intact.

Many questions remained unanswered, intriguing people across the known world. Why was the Ceiling shaped by humans, but not by anything else? Did the Ceiling prove that humans, collectively, were bound to follow the footsteps of their ancestors and did not dare to make their own paths? The Ceiling attracted people from distant lands, who wondered if the stories of the "translucent mountain" were real.

One day, an unknown population came to Subne. They were given the name Automats. Even though their bodies were human, their movement and behavior were not. They moved from one random point of the city to another random point, in a straight line, then to another random point, and so on. Ignorant of the existing paths, the Automats walked on private property, climbed buildings, and made their way through crowds. They never talked, slept or died.



The inhabitants of Subne seemed worried upon their arrival, but eventually realized that they were not harmful. However, the problem came with time, after several generations. It became clear that their walks had the power to change the shape of the Ceiling, just like the humans'.

The Automats had grown in number, significantly, and had become a part of the environment. With their never-ending random walks, they had explored every part of the city: the center, the outskirts and everything in between. They did not discriminate the space because of its popularity; they ventured into the places where no one else dared to venture. For this reason, the overall shape of the Ceiling had changed. It grew taller and started to even out. Resembling a dome, it was silencing the significant height variations from the past.

Since their arrival, the Automats had been a delicate subject in politics. Nobody knew how to deal with them because they were not human yet lived in the city. However, with the growing evidence of the Ceiling's changing shape, protests became a common thing. The inhabitants claimed that the Automats were erasing the immortalized paths of the first settlers and all the history of Subne. Their ancestors' walks were being erased and their heritage was being lost, along with their culture.

It took a great number of rebellions and debates to arrive to a solution that would protect what was left of the collective monument. This is how the people built the great prison. Following the advice of the mathematicians, it was strategically placed close to the city center, to catch the Automats more rapidly. It was an incredibly ingenious machine: anyone could walk in, but no one could walk out of it... .

It took a long time for most of the Automats to walk into the prison, but they eventually did. Unable to leave it, they were forced to walk inside of it, forever. Even though it was generous in size, it soon became overcrowded. The Automats would climb over each other, like ants in perpetual motion.

Few people dared to go see the prison, and those who did left perplexed. The visitors from distant lands were scandalized by such an inhumane scene. The dignity and magnificence of the city was shadowed by the prison. Trying to fix their reputation, the people of Subne did not allow any humans to get near it, hiding the atrocity that they had created.

Generations passed, and the Ceiling had retaken its human-induced form, although every point was higher than before. Undisturbed by the Automats, the orange and pink blanket above the city was once again a source of pride. However, from far away, the travelers could see an enormous thin tower. Between the mountains, it rose above the clouds, shining in orange and pink. What Subne was trying to hide had become the most prominent element of its monument.

Graduates Short Story

1st place

The Gaze of the Abyss

Christine Zheng

He sat in an office. Although it was small, it contained more than any other office that he had been in. There were white shelves everywhere. On them were books, small potted plants, picture frames and many pieces of decoration that the man would have loved to examine up close if his hands and feet weren't shackled. From the only window in the room, he could see the bustling city life fourteen stories lower. Making himself comfortable in the plain grey cushion seat he was sitting on, the man looked at the empty chair in front of him, wondering what they would try to do this time.

The door clicked open.

※※※

When Raylene first saw the information files regarding her new patient, she immediately figured out what type of man he was. A criminal, and the worst kind too: a murderer. Raylene couldn't help but gulp. Even though she had chosen this patient specifically, she couldn't help but shiver when remembering the photos of the victims that the police showed her.

Now standing in the elevator that would bring her to the fourteenth floor, her heels were shaking from her strong emotions.

"Good luck."

Raylene snapped from her trance. She looked to where the voice had come from and saw her colleague and friend Sam Colby. Flashing an amused smile, she asked:

“Are you telling me that because of what happened to the previous doctors?”

“Well,” Colby said while bringing his coffee cup to his lips, “that man did turn half of them crazy and made the other half go missing.”

Raylene chuckled.

“You don’t need to worry about me, Sam. I chose this man and I’ll fix him,” she answered confidently.

“I don’t doubt your abilities, Ray, but you should know that he has a reputation for being a ladies’ man, and… well… you are a woman.”

“Now that’s just sexist, Sam. And ignorant too. What if he doesn’t like women? Think about that.”

Raylene flashed a smile one last time and exited the elevator to walk towards the room where her patient was.

With a shaky hand, she clicked the door open.

Raylene had dealt with all kinds of people, from depressed middle-aged men to young soldiers suffering from PTSD, but she had not expected for a serial killer to look like a literal prince.

There he sat, in white clothes. Golden curls sat on his head and long curly eyelashes hung over the clearest blue eyes. His face was so prettily sculpted that he could have been easily mistaken for a woman if the rest of him didn’t resemble a Greek god. At the sound of the door, he swiftly turned around and the ends of his lips curved slightly upwards. Raylene was caught off guard by the man’s looks, but quickly got herself together when she remembered who he was.

“Mr. Timothy Green, am I right? My name is Dr. Raylene Tramell, and you will be in my care from now on.”

The murderer smirked and said:

“Do your best, dear doctor.”

Raylene shot him a look. She didn’t like how he acted so indifferent after everything he had done.

“Mr. Green, you are known as the Gray Killer because out of the dozens of people you’ve murdered. All of them had only one common trait: their eyes were grey. Why did you choose that kind of target?”

“Why should I tell you, Doctor? Isn’t it your job to figure that out and heal me?”

Raylene sighed.

“If I knew, I would tell you, Mr. Green. Usually, serial killers who kill according to their victims’ body traits do it because that specific trait reminds them of an ex-lover, someone they hate, or even because they simply think that it’s unacceptable to have such a trait. However, records show that you have never been abused by anyone, have never been in a relationship and do not believe in any sort of religious fanatism. You are quite a peculiar case, Mr. Green.”

“Well then. Since you’ve told me something that I’ve enjoyed hearing, let me tell you a story,” Mr. Green said calmly and Raylene could’ve sworn his eyes got darker.

“Once upon a time, there was a little boy. He had grown up loved by his parents, by his teachers at school, and he had plenty of friends. He had the highest grades and was the king of his school. However, he always felt that something had been missing, and felt so until his eighteenth birthday. That day, he was walking in an ordinary street when a young girl ran into him. She was hurt badly and was bleeding profusely. She begged him to help her, crying on her knees, and her silver eyes filled with tears of fear were pleading for help. The boy could’ve sworn that at that moment, the eyes before him were the most magnificent sight in the world, and he knew he had finally found the missing piece of his life. He offered to help her and enjoyed hearing her cries of joy when he thought about how he would utterly crush her feelings. When they were in his house, he slit her throat with a kitchen knife and felt his heart swell with joy as her dead silver eyes stared at him in shock and despair. From then on, the boy would be on the hunt for that same silver look.”

Raylene froze after hearing such a story. She looked into those now dark eyes and got lost in their swirling shadows. Was this the last thing his victims saw?

“Is that your motive, Mr. Green? Is that why you killed those people? To see a pair of eyes?”

The criminal’s smile grew.

“Enough about me. What about you? Why do you do this?”

“Mr. Green, I’m the one who asks the questions and you’re the one who answers them. That’s how it works.”

“Don’t be such a party-pooper. Aren’t you supposed to “heal” me? How are you supposed to do that when we don’t even know each other?”

Raylene pursed her lips and jotted something down on her notepad. She now knew why this man scared off the other doctors. He was much too different from ordinary patients. He liked to play mind games and Raylene was up for the challenge.

“I chose this job because it’s what I want to do. I want to help people like a doctor does.”

“Right. You want to eliminate the mental illnesses that lurk inside my mind.”

“I’m not eliminating anything. I’m just trying to help you heal yourself.”

“I think that you want me to destroy myself. My mind is a piece of me and tearing that away from me is no different than… murdering me mentally.”

The doctor opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. Instead, she closed it abruptly and looked at her patient seriously.

“Mr. Green, I know all about you and what you’ve done to those who have tried to help you. You might think that whatever you’re doing might work on me but let me assure you that I’m not like the others, so I suggest you stop with –”

“He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster.”

“I’m sorry?”

“And if you gaze for long into an abyss,” the criminal said softly with a dark look in his eyes.

“The abyss gazes also into you.”

Raylene maintained their eye contact for an intense moment before quickly getting up.

“Officers? I think that concludes our first appointment. Please take him back to his private room.”

“I’m looking forward to our next meeting, Doctor Tramell…”

Raylene couldn’t stay in that room any longer. That man was not normal. His mind was twisted, and it seemed impossible to heal him.

As she looked at the bustling city below her, Sam Colby walked up to her.

“So? How did it go?”

Raylene bit her lip.

“I don’t know. This man… he… his mind seems unreadable. I can’t seem to win against this guy.”

She now looked at her friend with concern in her eyes.

“Do you know what he told me? He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you. That’s a famous quote from Friedrich Nietzsche.”

“Do you think that you’ll become a monster, Ray?”

Raylene sighed and looked at the blue sky. She couldn’t get those light yet dark eyes out of her mind.

“I don’t know, Sam, but it sure feels like the abyss is gazing into me.”

Raylene walked away, leaving a confused Sam with one thought.

“Okay, now what?”

Judge’s comment: From the very first paragraph, Christine Zheng has created a chilling, thrilling read about the disturbing relationship between Dr. Raylene Tramell and her patient, the murderer Timothy Green. Through evocative description and eery dialogue, the story’s climax builds around the Nietzschean quote: “He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.” The story is a brilliant take on this famous, gripping warning.

2nd place

Gloom

Adrien Thibault

When I saw the Sparrow-10, glistening like a silver star, the little girl in me couldn't help herself. My hands started shaking, my heart started pounding, I squeaked in jubilation. I'd seen pictures, obviously, but being close enough to physically *touch* it was magical.

"Impressive, huh," the man in the suit said.

I nodded. "Yeah, it's beautiful. It's so much bigger than I'd imagined."

The Sparrow-10 was perfectly spherical. There was a round hatch on one side, and a metal peg wheel on the other. A long steel chain attached to the top of the submarine stretched to the ceiling and along the walls. I glanced around at the pulleys and chains, wondering how such a marvel could even exist.

"So you signed everything with Moretti?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"And you know you'll be paid afterward, right?"

I nodded and smiled. "Everything is clear."

"Perfect." The man rubbed his hands, like a fly. "I'll go tell Victor you're ready."

He walked out of the docking room. Suddenly it dawned on me.

"Wait," I cried out. "Victor as in Victor Davenport, the oceanologist?"

The man stopped. He turned, opened his mouth closed it, smiled, and said he'd be right back.

I figured it couldn't be. Victor had been a good friend in school, but he didn't seem like the manager type. He was the kind of guy who gazed at fish, not the one who signed off deals.

The man in the suit came back, smiling radiantly.

“Everything’s sorted,” he said. “Ready to hop in the sub?”

“Of course.”

He walked to the big peg wheel and turned it twice. On the other side, the hatch clicked and snapped open.

“Come on,” he said. “Get in. I promise it looks bigger on the inside.”

I followed his instructions. The interior was a four-meter-long bubble, exactly as tall as it was wide. The sides were bordered by a red cushioned bench, and the walls were covered in monitors, speakers, cables, and blinking LEDs. There was a big round window on the floor.

“Wow,” I said. “It *does* look pretty big.”

The man leaned in through the hatch.

“Victor will talk to you on the comms system,” he said. Do you need anything before I close the hatch?”

I told him I was all good, and that I was looking forward to meeting Victor. He smiled one last time and walked out of view. The hatch snapped shut.

A second later, there was a crackle, and a familiar voice rang out from one of the speakers.

“Hey Sam, can you hear me?”

It took me a moment to recognize him.

“Victor?”

His disembodied laugh filled me with memories.

“Yes, it’s me. Surprised, huh?”

“Yeah. Well, no. Well, I… I didn’t see your name in the…”

“Well I’m the director of the expedition,” he said. “I’ll open the floor hatch in a second and you’ll be lowered down with the chain. Are you ready?”

I nodded, although I knew he couldn’t see me. “I am. Let’s do this.”

Through the floor window, steel plates moved around with the loud grating of metal. The space in the floor widened an inch at a time, revealing dark and frothy waters.

“I suggest you take a seat,” Victor said.

I sat on the cushioned bench. The metal floor slowly disappeared under my window.

The Sparrow-10 creaked. I pressed my hand against the wall to hold it, but the wires and monitors had no grip.

“Releasing.”

I fell.

For a moment, all I saw was white foamy water. I could hear the violent splashing, but the noise was distant and muted by the thick metal walls. Then, the water became teal.

The speakers crackled.

“You are now underwater,” Victor said. “Everything is working as intended. The monitor next to the communications system should show your exact depth, with nearly no latency.”

Sure enough, one of the screens was now indicating *5 meters.* Then, 7. 9. 11. 13. My metal bubble slowly sank, deeper and deeper.

I peered outside the porthole. All I could see outside was an unending blue-green expanse. Columns of bubbles rose from the depths and up to the surface, which was overshadowed by the dark hull of the *Otodus Corp.* ship.

“So,” Victor said. “How’ve you been? It’s been a while, hasn’t it.”

“It has. It really has. I’m fine, how about you?”

There was a silence. Then, the speakers crackled again.

“Me too.”

21 meters. 23. 25.

“I’m surprised you came,” Victor said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well.” He paused. “I didn’t know you’d care about a shipwreck mission. You know, you’re *Samantha Cullen*.”

I was about to say I didn’t care what the contract was as long as the paycheck was good but didn’t.

“I was intrigued by the submarine,” I said instead. “It brings me back. Remember when we came up with designs for subs?”

“Of course. They were… very unrealistic.”

I laughed. “So I figured I’d sign up. I like these missions. It gives me a break from all the… you know…”

“Fame?”

I paused. The air was heavy. Maybe it was just the submarine.

“I guess,” I said.

Silence.

47 meters. 49. 51.

“You know,” Victor said, “The junior oceanologist spot was supposed to be mine.”

My hands clenched up. His words had come out of the blue, but I knew exactly what he was talking about. The *Moray-27* expedition.

“Oh?”

Victor’s disembodied laugh rang out again.

“Don’t act surprised,” he said. “You knew what you were doing when you waltzed in with your pristine resume. *Moray 27* would have changed my life.”

I was sweating. I didn’t know what to say. I stammered for a response.

“But look,” Victor went on. “Samantha Cullen, PhD in biology, postdoc in oceanology… it just sounds better. Everybody likes you, Sam. Hell, I saw your movie, and even *I* liked it. I’m happy for you. I really am.”

I thanked him.

We didn’t speak for a while.

91 meters. 129. 255. The water was becoming darker and darker.

Victor’s words echoed in my head. *I’m happy for you.* They sounded dishonest. Full of venom.

Something big passed by the window. It looked like a cow shark.

303 meters. 321. 325.

I couldn't take it anymore.

"I'm sorry, Victor. You're right, I knew I was stealing the spot. It was unethical."

"Don't worry about it, Sam," Victor's voice said. "I've moved on. Seriously though, I'm just glad you came."

I said I was glad to be here as well.

"How about coffee after we bring you back up?" he asked. "I know a place."

The tension in my shoulders dropped. Suddenly the air seemed to be much lighter.

"That would be nice," I said.

Another cow shark swam past.

"You're four hundred meters deep," Victor said. "I'll turn on your headlights so you can see."

Right outside the hatch, two sickly yellow floodlights switched on. The shark got scared and swam away.

"The shipwreck should be near," Victor said when I'd reached 700 meters.

I peered down the floor window. Nothing but darkness. Underneath me was a murky abyss with no end in sight.

"I'm looking forward to seeing it," I said.

"It's awesome," Victor said. "It's a giant warship hanging off a cliff edge. Super dramatic."

This took me by surprise.

"So you *have* done an expedition before?"

"Yes," Victor said. "But we didn't log anything. That's why we needed you to go as well."

By now the water was pitch black. The floodlights didn't light very far anymore. I was engulfed in oppressive nothingness.

791 meters. 801. 805.

And suddenly, it came into sight.

“Jesus Christ,” I cried. “It’s huge!”

Victor laughed. “Told you.”

The Sparrow-10 slowly came to a halt. Through the tiny hatch, I could see the massive remains of a run-down metal hull covered in rust and weeds. The ship was dangling off the edge of a titanic underwater cliff.

“Write down everything you see,” Victor said. “Fish, coral, all of it. You have a journal under the bench.”

I grabbed the journal and a sharpie and looked out the window. There was barely anything, but I didn’t want to appear incompetent. I was Samantha Cullen. I’d find something.

After half an hour, I had a page of notes. *Hatchetfish, white-spotted jellyfish*, *a group of blue crabs*, that kind of stuff.

“Ok,” I said. “What now?”

Victor didn’t answer.

“Victor,” I said. “Do you copy?”

“Yes,” his voice rang out. “Don’t worry, I’m here.”

A short silence. The shipwreck creaked; a loud, guttural groan that could have shaken the earth.

“Have you heard about the *Bigfin* expedition?” Victor asked.

“Of course,” I said. “I’m going to…”

“I *have* to go,” Victor interrupted.

I didn’t know what to say.

“It’s in a month,” he went on. “They’re still organizing it. And there’s one spot left for the oceanology crew.”

“I know. Victor, I-”

“This is big,” he said. “Very big.”

His voice sounded distorted. Like it was too deep for the signal to read well.

“The budget is off the charts,” Victor said. “There’s a documentary crew on board. This is my only chance to break through, do you understand?”

“But I already signed the contract,” I said. “I signed it a week ago. I’m sorry, Victor. They absolutely wanted me on board. Professor Goulding came to see me in person.”

The speakers crackled, but Victor didn’t say anything.

“We can talk about this when I’m back up,” I said. “Over coffee. I’d be glad to give you a recommendation, I can-”

“I didn’t want it to come to this,” he interrupted.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry, Sam,” Victor said. “I can’t have you come up again, and again, and *again* (and on that last *again* his voice edged on the roar) between me and my dreams.”

“Victor, I-”

Suddenly, the Sparrow-10 shook. There was another loud creak, except this time it didn’t come from the ship.

My heart beat madly in my ears. Suddenly, the inside of the submersible felt very, very small.

“So this whole thing was a trap?” I asked.

“Well, my plan was for you to back down and give me the spot. We can always use the shipwreck data. And I would’ve liked coffee.”

“But I can back down!” I got on my knees, begging the speakers. “Victor, just pull me back up and we can discuss this. We can get coffee! I’ll pay!”

The Sparrow-10 jerked.

“I’m sorry, Samantha. I know you too well to believe all that.”

Suddenly I started sinking again. Only much faster. The shipwreck went by, then the cliff edge, as I sank into the abyss.

I begged, and begged, but Victor didn’t respond.

When I finally hit the seafloor 600 meters deeper, a cloud of white dust covered the windows. Like dead snow. My mouth was dry and my head spinning.

When the dust settled, I saw the long metal chain of the Sparrow-10 lifeless in the sand. It had been cleanly cut in half.

The yellow floodlights flickered and died, and I was plunged in gloom.

Judge’s comment: I was not expecting the incredible plot twist at the heart of this short story – a slow, descriptive descent to the bottom of the ocean floor in the protagonist’s vessel, aptly named the *Sparrow-10*. Written around the central metaphor of a shipwreck, this story is a riveting exploration of just how far someone is willing to go in the name of opportunism.

3rd place

Untitled
Maxine Kang-Auger

Marlene, January 2021, during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic

My granddaughter Karen has always been so helpful. I'm so grateful I don't live alone; I have no idea what I would do without her. Before Covid, I had a caregiver to help me with my needs, but Karen does such a better job. Honestly, it's such a good thing Karen and I enjoy each other's presence. We are quarantined together, and it really wouldn't be ideal to be stuck with someone you hate.

"Karen, come here! Come give me my water bottle. I accidentally dropped it," I said, as I looked helplessly at my bottle on the floor.

As usual, Karen was quick to respond. I was so blessed to have her. She came into the room and hurriedly gave me my bottle. Sadly, before she and I could engage in conversation, she already left the room.

Marlene, January 1920, during the third wave of Spanish flu

Mother called me to her room. My muscles tensed, likely a sign of my irritation towards mother. I remembered my psychotherapy and took deep breaths in an effort to compose myself. Ever since the lockdown due to the pandemic, I could not stand my mom. She was so unbearable and couldn't seem to keep to herself. The difference is, before, I had an escape. I could leave the house whenever I wanted to breathe fresh air. Now, I was stuck, constantly suffocating in the infected air, polluted by my mother's breath.

Mother called my name once again.

"Marlene! Come here right now. I need your help!" she screeched in a raspy, strained voice. My muscles tensed. Was she unable to do things by herself? I clenched my fist and

impulsively struck the wall. I watched as blood trickled down my fist, staining the milky white wall a scarlet
red colour. I stood in shock for quite some time, contemplating what had just occurred as the blood dried and turned crimson red.

Marlene, January 2021, during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic

It happened again. My bottle was on the floor. "Karen, come here! I dropped my water bottle again. I need you to pick it up for me," I sighed.

To my surprise, Karen took a bit more time to arrive. "Faster, Karen!"

She didn't say a word as she opened the door and entered my room, a bleak look on her face. Teasing her, I said, "That took you long. Are you hard of hearing?"

Karen didn't respond and looked at me blankly. I stayed silent, unsure if she understood my joke.

Marlene, January 1920, during the third wave of Spanish flu

Nighttime was the only time I ever had peace. Mother would sleep, bringing a strange but reassuring calmness. Tonight, I decided I would explore the house. Not quite sure what I was looking for, I headed downstairs, cautiously scampering down the steps. A bright object on the kitchen floor caught my eye. It glinted in such a beautiful, enrapturing manner. Unable to resist, I grabbed it and delicately positioned it in my pocket.

Mother didn't often buy these kinds of toys. She found them unnecessary and superfluous. I, however, had always thought that I could do great things with them.

Marlene, January 2021, during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic

Karen had always done such a great job of looking after the house. She was currently doing the dishes; the loud clinking of dishes resonated across the walls. Suddenly, the clinking stopped.

Marlene, January 1920, during the third wave of Spanish flu

Wanting to flaunt my new toy, I went to my mother's room and shook her awake. "I want to show you something, Mother."

She grunted, half-awake, and propped herself upwards, ready to observe what I was about to show her. With pride, I showed her my new shiny toy. She looked at me, unimpressed, with a piercing gaze of disapproval. My muscles tensed; it didn't seem as though she believed I could do anything significant with it. But that didn't matter. I was tired of my mother bossing me around as if I was her servant. It was time she understood her actions were not acceptable. I gave the shiny toy to her, pushing it hard against her chest. Mother would understand now.

Marlene, January 2021, during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic

Karen unexpectedly arrived at my door. "Shouldn't you be doing the dishes?" I expressed. Ignoring me, she declared, "I want to show you something, Granny."

Was this a joke? Had my childhood come to haunt me once again? Now what, what was I supposed to do?

I stayed still, dumbstruck, knowing my time had come. Karen was holding one of the toys I had veneered as a child—did she really hate me as much as I hated my mother? That part was the hardest to come to terms with. But I lay down, peacefully, as my granddaughter finally pushed her shiny toy against my chest.

Judge's comment: This story was a tender exploration of inter-generational memory, and the idea of history repeating itself. Told through the split perspective of Marlene, who lived through two pandemics – as a young girl caring for her mother during a third wave of the so-called "Spanish flu", and as a grandmother herself, living through Covid-19 – the challenges

of being a care-giver and a patient are explored in attentive and thoughtful ways in this short story.

From the Archives

Help not Handed

Danyi Wang

08:36 a.m.

Zachary leaned against the thick glass wall, watching from the top of his renowned building as an old woman on the other side of the street pathetically lugged around a big garbage bag. She was rummaging through the grey trash cans lining the busy street, picking out pop cans and trinkets. He watched her with intensity until his gaze diverted to a bearded man sleeping on the sidewalk with a beautiful but frail German Sheppard. He felt the sudden urge to run over to give the woman his Fossil watch and maybe his silver cufflinks. She could probably sell both for a small fortune. He wanted to send the shivering sleeper to spend a night in the Plaza hotel. God knows that by the next morning, Zach would be sporting a brand-new watch, maybe Rolex or Ulysse Nardin, his wallet undented. He peered down once again, uncertain and torn, but this time, he saw a young boy, no more than ten years of age, skinny as a stick and dirty as a pig, put his hand into a passerby's purse and fish out a large red wallet.

08:43 a.m., many years ago

Hearing a shout, the boy glanced through the thick mass of people, spun around and dashed away quickly and swiftly. Leaving the main street, he slowed down, panting like a dog against the wall of a small alleyway. He felt the adrenaline pumping through his veins die down as his heart stopped thrashing violently against his ribcage. The boy zipped open the purse, disposing of random receipts and an old lipstick, looking happily at the stack of green-grayish bills and the shiny cards. He headed back to his run-down home, sighing contentedly. Today had been a fairly good morning. He walked into the dingy apartment, the view of a man snorting a line of white powder off of the kitchen island with a beer in hand greeting him. Bringing in the purse, he handed the man the money. The boy was clapped on the back as the man grunted out an incoherent salutation. He headed towards his bedroom, lying on his bedbug ridden bed, hungry and tired, but he hadn't ever known better.

Life was as good as it could get for the boy, until one morning, a burly man in a blue uniform came to take him away. No one bothered to give the nine-year-old son of a drug addict an explanation to why his father never came home for him, but he soon discovered that the neighbourhood was filled with half blind eyes and nearly deaf ears. He was sent to a rundown orphanage just down the road from his old apartment where kids were stripped of their childhood as soon as they stepped foot through the threshold. There, real-life hit him in the face when the older, bigger boys started picking on the small and innocent newcomer.

His whole life, the young boy had lived life with a smile on his face and a delicious ignorance that had protected him from his father's repeated mistakes and the neighbouring rumors. It came as a shock when whispers followed everywhere he went. "That's him. The boy whose father died. I hear they found him in the alleyway lying face first in his own puke, but it wasn't an overdose. No, what really happened was way worse…"

"I hear that he was found in the little alley behind X street… Yes, the one with the subway graffiti."

The boy cried on his first night in the orphanage. The others sniggered, laughing at his weakness and the boy had never wanted his mother so badly. The next day, when he was getting beaten to a pulp, he wished that she had taken him with her on her long vacation to a place where she would be happy again.

One morning, after being chased by a lanky but out of shape peace officer, the boy stumbled into a small backstreet. It was dark and smelled like dead rats and was lined with big garbage bins, which meant that it was perfect hideaway. He sat down to catch his breath and found himself staring at an intriguing graffiti of a green subway floating on rails, surrounded by planets and constellations. It was hauntingly beautiful in a way where the boy couldn't quite decide if he was staring at Heaven of looking into the darkness of Hell. He looked down and there, on the concrete there was a splatter of disgusting brown. His eyes flashed with horror as he realized where he was. His father had taken two bullets through the skull right where he sat. He had learned from broken whispers and plot hole filled stories that he had been killed for his money, or rather lack of. Bitter, the boy decided that this alleyway was definitely the gateway to the Underworld. The boy cried before he trudged back to the orphanage filled with sorrow and defeat to hand over a small pink clutch over to a tall boy with a wicked smirk and cruel eyes. The boy told himself that that would be the last time he would let himself be used before packing up his things and leaving to build himself a better life.

8:43 a.m., present.

Zachary pressed his forehead against the cool glass. The memories he had suppressed at the back of his mind found their way back to him, consuming his thoughts and taking hold of his nerves. He was shaking violently, his breathing heavy and ragged. His past was a bitter reminder of reality and of how far he had come by building his company from scratch. He had done so without love, without care and most importantly, without anyone's help. He took one last glance at the view below, swallowed his thoughts of kindness and empathy and turned away abruptly. Nobody had ever offered to lend him a hand and in return, he would never offer it to anyone. Never again.

Judge's comments: A nice piece of writing, Danyi. Well done.

You have given us a realistic glimpse into Zachary's life, demonstrating how, while he has overcome his horrific past to become a "success," that difficult past still has its hooks in him.

I liked how you use details early on to show that Zachary enjoys material success. The brand names and the other trappings of wealth paint that picture without you having to say "He's a successful businessman." As the old writing adage goes, it is always better to show, not tell.

Graduates Poetry

1st place

Ok, now what?

Lisa Chen

Day 1

Pizzicato.
The baby is born,
Dreaming new ideas with emotions and pictures,
For these are the first languages of us all.
Sweet dreams, little baby.

Age 5

She is at elementary school.
Innocent and pure at heart.
C, D, E, F, G
The music of her life has begun.
Now in sixth grade, she is excited for high school.

Age 16

“The best years of your life are your teenage years,” as they say.
Evening in the city
In the graphite-lullaby,
Each vivid hue collects their boarding pass
For the land of dreams and ambitions.
The wind shaped by an unhurried crescendo, whoosh!
Her way of living is to love and cherish,
Growing wings that lifter her up to the highest heights.
Looking forward for Cégep.

Age 18

A boost of maturity struck her like a chord.
C, E, G, B flat.
Going past discomfort for real answers,
Fresh wisdom was awaiting her.
Finding the answers, she seeks for,
Looking forward to finally wrap it up with university.

Age 22

Just graduated.
The piece reaches a climax with a melodious and passionate harmony.
Peaking in life, she discovers the beauty of nature:
Clothing both land and soul.
Looking forward to her future job.

Age 23

Time to leave home.
She will remember the ugly old kitchen table.
Aging with her since age 5,
Becoming more of a character with age.
Though she leaves home,
Her bond remains.
Travelling different pathways,
Yet eternally connected.
She is leaving her house, not her home.
What should she look forward to now?
She'll see.

Age 26

She becomes successful.
She completed the C major scale.

C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C.

Success.

Defined in such narrow ways

As by monetary riches or fame

We are missing all the things that makes life so wonderful.

Money,

Man made,

An artificial harmony.

Choosing to honour nature,

A natural C.

What should she wish for now?

INTERMISSION

Age 30

Second movement of the symphony.

In her thirties, here is a new beginning.

Ok, now what?

Judge's comment: A compelling contemplation of the earlier stages of life, the weight of expectations, the angst of important decisions to make and the mystery of the ones yet to be discovered. Insightful, delightful; this poem is vivid, packed with hopeful curiosity, packaged in a playful musical allegory, and overflowing with life. As with many good things, ends too soon.

2nd place

"So, what now?"

Zuolong Wu

It's been a while since I've been here

I never thought I'd be back here
balancing on the railing
looking at the water

I should have known that it would stay with me
it never really left me
it just stays
preying from the depths
the depths of my mind
occasionally popping up for a few days
a few days of peace
and happiness
and then it'll leave
it'll leave me for a few days
all alone
for a few days

but now, it's back
and I can feel it throbbing in my head
it took me to this bridge
and I can feel it doesn't want to leave today

it tells me that he needs to be free
and that so do I
I want to be free too
but do I want to be free?
is this the freedom that I want?

but it tells me to stop
to stop questioning
questioning meaningless questions

so I do
because I can’t think
and my head throbs

it keeps telling me
that love isn’t fair
that life isn’t fair
that I can’t help myself
that I’m hopeless
a lost cause
and I agree
because I trust him
and my head throbs

so i keep doing what it wants
enchanted by its promises of peace
peace in a hopeless world
peace in a lonely world
so I stay and listen
and listen to its promises of
peace
once again

his voice
deep and concerned
echoes in my head
echoes
bouncing from side to side
unable to be set free
free of my head
thousands of little echoes
making my head throb

it tells me that he can help
with my suffering
that it can show me peace
that it can cure me
and it’s told me that everytime
everytime we see each other
everytime
I don’t know why I refused
last week
because it didn’t get better
and I wish I listened
and I wish I followed through
followed through to a world of peace
and freedom

I wished a thousand little wishes
a thousand tiny wishes
condensed into clarity
and happiness
and hopefulness
but it showed me the truth
the ugly truth
of life
of my life
and it showed me the truth
of these wishes
of these childish prayers
irresponsible
and impossible

so I took those wishes

those tiny littles wishes
and put them in a box
a tiny box
for all of my hopes and dreams
for me to throw out
one day

and so, I'm back
back at the bridge
balancing on the railing
looking outwards
at the water below
thinking

I wonder if it'll hurt
I wonder
and I wonder
endless questions
endless thoughts
endless
and I try to stop
and I want it to stop
but it's back
and I can feel it gnawing at my heart
it doesn't want it to stop
so neither do I

memories flash by
memories of failures
memories of hatred
feelings of hopelessness
feelings of shame

it’s here and I can feel it
it’s hurting me
but it’s a different kind of pain
and it tells me to embrace it
so I embrace it
and I love it

it asks me if I’m sure
and asks me if there’s anything that I want to do
so I tell him about love
and hope
thinking it’ll matter
but my companion brushes it aside
telling me terrible things
terrible
terrible things
about my life
about my friends
but my brain throbs
and I can’t think
so I embrace his words
because I trust him
and I trust him with my life
because he’s always here for me

he tells me that it’s a sacrifice
for something bigger
better
it’s a sacrifice for
peace
and love
for once in my life

I can feel peaceful
I can feel loved
so I let it happen
and I embrace it
because I trust him

and so, I'm sitting
and relaxing
back at the bridge
balancing on the railing
looking outwards
at the water below
shaking
and peaceful
thinking
about
nothing

nothing at all

he's back
and I can feel him pumping in my blood
I can feel him in my body
everywhere
my friend doesn't want to leave today
and I'm glad
I haven't been happier
happier that someone's always here for me
    no matter what
he's always there
    no matter what
unlike everyone else

and I’m glad

a police officer arrives
asking me if I’m alright
asking me to get down
asking me to leave the knife
but I like the pain
and I like my cuts
and I love my friend
so I stay
and I tell him i’m fine

but he doesn’t want to leave
and he keeps saying stuff
that I don’t understand
he tells me that I can be happy
but I don’t know if I want it
if it’s even possible
my friend tells me that it’s not worth it
so I don’t want it
and I tell him that

but he isn’t satisfied
he wants more
more of my tears
more of my blood
because he keeps talking
screaming
screeching
to me
in my head
and he hurt my friend

and he hurts my head
so I ran
with my friend
away
away from him

my friend wants to jump
to escape him
to escape the world
for once and for all
and he tells me that
that it’s for the better
that it’s for me
and that it’s for him
that it’s for hope
and peace
so I do too
I believe him
I trust him
with my life

but he catches me
evil
evil man
he catches me
and gives me offers
of hopeless hope
and of purposeless purpose

but my friend doesn’t want it
so I don’t want it
and I tell him that

but he doesn’t listen
he doesn’t want to listen
to me
to my words

and so
I’m in the car
bright blue and reds
with my friend
looking outwards
at the water below
covered in cuts
shaking
stuck
once again
with an evil man
heading nowhere
thinking

“What now?”

Judge’s comment: An excellently rhythmic, well-paced, and hypnotizing read despite the poem’s sporadic use of repetition, its length, and lack of conventional punctuation and structure. These elements perfectly combine to accompany the text’s voice and musings; a confusing, drawn out inner struggle that needs to be ended.

3rd place (tie)

Work in Progress
Tiffany Pham-Le

From smiles and laughter
To sadness and hunger
From a colorful world
To black and white pictures

I look into the mirror, and who do I see?
I see a child banging on the glass, begging to go through
To give her future self a big hug and tell her: “I’m proud of you.”
She is so radiant, this blissful child
And she has such a beautiful heart
So strong, so kind: it is pure art.

“What do we do now?” she asks, as adulthood comes around the corner
“We’ll have to find out,” I reply, reassuring her.

I tell her everything will be alright; I got our teenage years figured out
It was a series of roller coaster rides, but in the end, we really had our fun
She will be showered with memories, and in the meantime, I will have stories to tell
“We won’t ever be alone”, I tell her, “As long as you have your people around.
The universe drew us a chaotic future, it is true
But life is not a straight line, it has spots of red and blue
Regardless of the chaos, it is also pink, yellow, purple, and green
In the end, I promise, we’ll be a magnificent masterpiece.”

From sadness and hunger
To smiles and laughter
From black and white pictures
To a world with peace
In the end, I promise, we’ll be a magnificent masterpiece.

Judge’s comment: A relatable inner dialogue for the times that balances introspection, hope, and self-care. An honest reconciliation of naivety and maturity.

3rd place (tie)

Grave of the Fireflies

Nerissa Lu

Wage war for peace
Preach freedom to our kingdom
Our bloodshed paints their roses
Every bomb dropped silences
His child
Their land
Her mother
My sanity
Our hope
Home

Surrender!
As they kept piling up bodies
Who had lost all trace of identity
There were just so many, so many
Casualties

Surrender!
As they ravaged our colonies
Ending us through air depravity
It was all so gray, so ashy, deceased
Economy

The bullets replaced with big words
Restlessly shooting at us no matter our pleas
Our ragged clothes and our bodies crowded with fleas

All in the name of democracy

Surrender!
As they stepped on our kneeling leaders
Who lay their heavy and worn figures
Upon our malnourished frames, apathetic
Famine

We surrender
As they all cheer for Victory,
Erect statues for their brave soldiers
Their courageous murderers

Who will mourn our country
Who will help us out of misery
Who can hear me
What now that we are painfully free?

The Land of the Rising Sun
Now a murky, tenebrous abyss
Dimly lit by the sole survivors
Insignificant, worriless creatures

So frail yet untouched
So beautiful yet not stolen
So alive yet not burdened

Singing amidst the prodigious grave
Are the fireflies born from our decision to waive

Judge's comment: A vivid contrast of harsh, unrelenting realities with their delicate and sporadic aftermath. There are horrors in our history of such magnitude that the best response

we can sometimes muster - after shock and awe - is to peer into the darkness and hope that fireflies - not flies - guide your way out.

From the Archives

You, my Beloved

Andrada Georgescu

You, my beloved.
Hair that makes the sunshine glint,
Eyes that make the stars look dim,
A presence that makes the angels sing.
Perfection incarnate.

But is it real? Is it true?
Do I wear rose-tinted glasses?
The guardians of the heart.
Are you simply the embodiment of my desires?

Are you an illusion? Truly so?
Have you not a brilliant and keen mind?
A heart of gold?
An aura of white brilliance?
Aren't you my better half?
Are you none other than a rose?
Whose thorns have been hidden by packaging.

Have you a hamartia?
Or are you a hamartia?

Who shall lead?
The heart or the mind?
The feeling or the reasoning?

For is the mind not dependent on the heart?

And the heart partially independent of the mind?

Meaning that intuition makes for a better leader?

Whatever my mind says,

I cannot ignore my feelings for you.

How I long to talk to you,

To be near you,

To hold your hand.

How the silence between us is never uncomfortable,

But simply peaceful.

Judge's comments: The classic tussle of mind and heart gives way, in the end, to a simple acceptance of proximity and the endearing intimacy of a touch as genuine proof of love. Many questions whirl around the speaker and the reader is happy that the landing is smooth.

Intermediate Poetry

1st place

The Pursuit of Wealth.
Elizabeth Powo

–

Interlude.
Life is not to be spent with anger and hate, but to be lived with love and happiness.
Life should be about embracing ourselves to the fullest and be the best version our person can be.
It also means loving *unconditionally,* because once you put conditions, it becomes *too* restricted.
Traumas are not to be underestimated and people either, since nobody knows what the others *really* go through.
Let's start being human again, in all vulnerability, and make the world
a better place.

–

They said never get too attached,
Because you never know who'll get to leave
unexpectedly.

I thought they were joking, but
I should've listened.

I sincerely thought that I would have been able
to make the world a better place,
just like any other type of doctor,
by curing diseases.

especially by being a pediatric surgeon,
who specializes with kids.

Children are so small. So pure. So gentle.
How do you get to tell them that they're about
To die?

The first time I had to let one of my patients go,
I lacked.

Of sleep.
Of energy.
Of laughter.

Med school was a hard road,
but they *never*,
ever
mentally prepared us for
This.

I spent more than ten years of my life
Studying
Reading
Learning

And none of what I 'learned'
Tops that feeling.

How to respond to a "ok, now what?" from a parent,
when they learn
that their child is
sick,
And is possibly
going to
die?

It takes me back to when I was
a little kid
and dreamt of
money.

Lacking of

some,
my parents fought to provide for
our family of six.

At 13, my younger brother died
because the surgery he needed,
and that had to be done quickly, required
a fat amount of money,

which we didn't have.

From then on, I promised myself that I would never
ever
lack of anything, whatever that may be.

So I hustled. From High School to College to University.
From University, which was medical school in my case, to Residency to Fellowship, to being able to perform surgery.
At that point, I was eager for money.
Full of hate.
Suicidal.
And didn't think of having children on my own
because of my own trauma.

I really believed that money would fill this void in my chest that never fully got to recover and heal as it was supposed to.

So I got myself into
a pursuit of wealth.

but the surgeon in me, whenever I was entering the hospital,
didn't care about
the money
Or the wealth
Or the big houses
Or the Porsche

Or anything that the little kid in me ever wanted.

She just cared about saving kids' lives
however she could,
because she knows what it's like
to lose someone you
Love.

She also realized that
Money can't buy life.

Although it definitely can buy *more* time.

And so, after all, I learned to respond
“make your child happy. listen to them. make them smile. make them do what *they* want.”
Whenever a parent asked me
“Ok, now what?”

Because they’re the fruit of their womb.
And because children are as precious
as pearls.

I also relearned how to
Love
Live
Smile

Laugh.

And I finally decided to have children
Because it’s the most beautiful thing,
to give birth and to care for someone
more than yourself,

but who isn’t you

while going on this journey with
your love in human form.

Because life is too precious to be spent with anger and hate,
While it should be lived with
Compassion
Hope
and

Unconditional Love.

Judge’s comment: Overly complex, often of our own making, life can be hard. The poem reflects the doubts and pressures and the toll these may wreak upon dreams. The energies of hate consume and wither relationships; better to follow paths of acceptance as suggested here.

2nd place

The Pursuit of Life
Rosalie Pham-Le

There is this bottomless pit, where all thoughts are processed.

In most days, this place contains nothing but rainbow and sunshine.
But on stormy days, this place is filled with rain, thunder, and harsh winds.
This place is the center of the human body.
Not only, should you do everything in your power to protect it,
You should take care of it every day.

Questions, thoughts, positivity: all is welcomed in this place.
You should take a break and ask yourself: Okay now what?
“I’ve reached a place, where my mind is full.
I can’t think, I can’t live, I can’t be happy. What can I do?
I overthink, I overdo, I over-everything.”

Not only this, but with this questioning of yourself,
You wonder… okay now what?
“Where am I in my life right now?
What are my next steps?
School? Isn’t that obvious?
Is there more to it? Is there more to life?
What are my options? What are my dreams? What is what?”
These life-questions are sometime painful:
To the point where these questions reach a breaking point.

In the end, asking questions, questions like okay now what?
It gets your life together.
It gets your life moving.
It gets your life, yours.
It’s not a question about comparing your path to other,
But a question to a quest where you find yourself;
not others, your-SELF.
It’s a SELF-finding journey.
It’s a SELF-cleansing path.

Mental health should be a number one priority,
Finding your true self,
Finding your answer to your “okay now what?”,
Finding a balance between you and life itself.

Sure, your brain is a bottomless pit,
But on the good days, you get to feel happy and loved.
Make those days count.
Don’t wait to find the days to be happy.
Seize them, live them.

Judge’s comment: Like the previous poem, the conclusions are to move forward with confidence and to build upon one’s very own person. ‘‘Make those days count’’ indeed!

Advanced Poetry

1st place

Cry Goddamnit

Sneha Dey

I was calmly watching TV
When suddenly

A shrieking pain slowly creeped up my spine.
My head vaulted back, my pelvic snapped at the border.
The stitches from my hemline, were waiting to burst like a land mine.
The next sizzling streak fired through as an exhilarating torture.

Waited for it to be at least 60 long seconds
Of unbearable pain. Predicaments.
Somewhat breathing between the four-minute mark
Struggling, gasping for air to enter my system at an arc.
Had to battle through my wits for a full hour
Shockingly didn't cower and at heart found the power
As the blistering sweats rolled down my forehead
As the sharp trebled tremble treaded ahead
As the spasm held a knife and stabbed at my womb
Again and again and again and again

'til I rolled over and hoped to bleed to death.

At last, I got rolled into the room
Hollered cries flew above my head, boom.
Hastily stuffed into their yellow uniform: itchy gown.
Ironically, asked to sedately lay down

As they poked through my body
To find somewhere to stick in the IV

I begged for the anesthetic
I could feel him crown
I was too dilated; they were too frantic.
Humiliation spread; terror dominated: nervous breakdown.

Within 8 outrageous hours
Of having my legs spread wide open
With my inner sex pointing outwards
Like a piece of raw fucking meat
I passed water
I passed blood
I passed feces

And I pushed with my legs pinned against the press
My calves, rock hard, exasperating the rigidity of my skin
And I pushed with salty tears hindering the empty ins and outs
From my weak set of exploited lungs
And I pushed with the excruciating throbbing from my perineum
Slowly opening, tearing, and finally completely lacerating

And I pushed war cries with lengthy false hope of convalescence.

Even then, the man had to stick both hands in
He had to force a pair of forceps deep within
The others had to externally push my bump
They had to convince me to stay awake, lifeless lump.

They finally rescued a little boy.
Emotional catharsis.

But I couldn’t hear the baby cry.

I stopped breathing
As if my end would be his beginning
But it couldn’t be,
It wasn’t.

Now
what?

Judge’s comment: Each stanza is its own snapshot of the birthing scenario, from feeling the first pangs to the final hard-hitting stage. Sneha takes us along an emotional rollercoaster, with a character attuned to the environment and her body, often quite gut wrenching.

2nd place

Chronicles of Kratos

Kabisan Vilvaratnam

Pardon the pulse of my arteries
Hard for me to convey
To say how much I hate that I wear my whole heart on my sleeve
With ease these feelings tear and trample through my ample disguise
My demise provoked by my faltering poker face

Face to face with my vices, questions of my own self-worth
Wordless hurt that trips my soul into the shadow that lurks
Further beneath the surface of where my contritions emerge
This umbra called insecurity casts a curse on me

Curse my health
Curse my flaws

Curse myself
Curse these thoughts
Purse my lips into silence
Mouth follows but mind doesn't stop
Twist these thoughts into circles and whirlpools and knots
Till that knot in my mind
Is a knot in my throat
Every word I've confined
To my thorax all float
To my gorge like an ocean
In motion or sea
That Moses himself with a staff couldn't cleave

In half and my mind starts to spaz go blank and go bananas
Because I have no room to breathe from these stanzas
And sonnets that my cingulate cortex spews with no appropriate context
Vex my esophagus until unconsciousness
Is riddling my vision
My legs start to falter
Falling to my knees
I need to see the altar
Beg for forgiveness hope my karma's intact
The universe senses deception my vision goes black
Truth is even if
the pastor the preacher and the choir that sings
Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala in their hymns
Locked hands with Arjuna who plucked from Govinda's string
And all together tied it tightly around both my shins
While whispering Solomon's sermons and worshiping Him
They probably couldn't lift up the laden load of my sins

The Gulf of Akaba springs from my mouth

Yew trees and lilies grow rampant and sprout

From all of my sockets, from my eyes to my ears

The silence it deafens, I'm no longer here

They fetched the VHS tape
The VCR rolls to a stop

Moirai etched on the label name

Their spindle spun and it rocked

Bountiful yarn flowed from their fingers, lace together the fabric of existence

Behemoths before me bequest me a question :

"As you stand before the pinnacle of your lifespan

The bane of your birth

As you watch the unfolding of your kismet

And your time here on Earth

Find peace in understanding this one simple tenet:

Your fate was sealed since your first breath on this planet"

Unrivaled they stood, as solid as rock

Conviction flowed from their mouths like streams to a dock

Feared by all and undisputed by none

Clotho, Atropos, Lachesis stood together as one

So imagine their shock when I pushed off Atropos

Off of her seat, through the void she did fall

Clamors of chaos tore through their lips

They ran with their wits, faces gray and appalled

Fuck your fate, I choose karma my soul bound by dharma

You call it a murder, I call it new order

Free we stand from the sins of what once was

We stand at the nexus of all that comes next

One question is left before the Old World is left

You changed your own fate, okay now what?

Judge's comment: Here there is the exploration of a character, flawed, lacking confidence, strength, power. There is a flow to Kabisan's writing that is conducive to exploring emotional states. Mythology suffuses the latter half to demonstrate a shift in power, a confrontation to godlike jurors (or so I perceive it), and a contrast to earlier passages. Very well constructed!

3rd place (tie)

The Story of Thuy Tinh and Son Thinh

Min Tu Chau

This poem depicts the flashbacks of someone's tragic events. These memories come back to the person's consciousness just like the yearly monsoon in Vietnam. Just like these memories, the monsoon is a period of time where everything is chaotic. In this story, us, the readers, are assisting this brouhaha, putting us in a state where we lack control.

The length of the verses is irregular to resemble waves used by the vengeful Thuy Tinh.

Farewell to these unwanted truths,
Farewell to a life full of guilt,
Farewell to these never lasting interludes,
Words I wished I could pronounce,
Like birds out of their cages.

Lord of the Waters, Thuy Tinh,
And high up in his throne
With a mind made of stone.
The Mountain God, his nemesis, Son Thinh,

A dual for the fruit of love,
A battle already lost before it started,
A battle for the best gift
In a fixed amount of time.
As Thuy Tinh arrives, he mourns;
Too late, too behind time.
Ego shattered;
With eyes full of choler;
Waves lash away their anger;
Fumbling the peak of the summit;
In denial of his defeat;

Blinded by his fury;
Hands on his face, he leaves;
Made it alive
For another day;
In exchange for self-pity.

The thirst of revenge;
Hello to a world in black and white;
May a continuous fight
Welcome in the doomsday;
As Thuy Tinh raises the water,
Son Tinh mountains go even higher;
Fear settles in;
Lord of the Waters bumping into his own grave;
Lucked out once again.

And you,
iris locked in this situation;
Pledging over a dispute that can't be controlled;
Maybe in another dimension,
Thuy Tinh,
Didn't let his ego take over bricks by bricks;
Bowed down to the mother of conflicts;

A world without the sun;
Dreams turned into crumbs.
Ok? What now?
Water being a necessity;
The soil outcries for its needs.

The thirst of revenge;
The monsoon with its waves;

Like memories with its eidetic frames;

Well,

Farewell to these headless chickens

Blindly wandering, climbing the world.

Clueless about their actions;

While I celebrate annually

Their lack of contrition.

Judge's comment: The beauty of poetry is that the reader might perceive something other than what the author intended. In this case, I felt like a never-ending conflict was at the forefront, but at the same time, the imagery suggested that there was a synergy to these two forces – inseparable aspects of nature. The final two stanzas suggest how this is a human struggle, enduring forces beyond one's control, but living within that framework.

3rd place (tie)

Spelling Game

Marie-Ève Truchon

You purse your lips, I know your lips

Yours and mine are the same

Like our mother's

I see it, I ask you

Crease your heart

For me

I know you will

Show me how

You don't even need to count

Twice

My age, you are

Whom I look up to, I suppose

And I'll agree, just write the words

For me, to speak

I’ll play along, I’ve learned
The rules
You’ve dealt
My point, it’s yours
To make
Your move
I’ll follow close by I swear
I am my own
Pawn

You told me dice have six sides
And some have said I throw
Like a girl, just
Like you
They will shuffle your cards
Give them back
To me, somehow
I thin my lips
You know my lips, where
Are you, look for you
With my eyes, I’m safe
Twice you said, some fates are worse
And meant it, I read your words
Out loud, and spelled them back
Okay

Now what

Crease my soul
And brace for it, I suppose

Judge's comment: Within a framework of intentional metering, I interpret this poem as someone following in an older sibling's footsteps, seeing them as a role model, but at the same time trying to forge their own path. There is insecurity to the voice, but ultimately, a strength that prevails.

From the Archives

My New Reality

Cyril Mani

A shelter from time, they slowed it down.
Giving it the right tempo, the perfect beat.
Each pulse of her heart, adding to the rhythm.
Of what my guts would feel, as a calm melody.

Worries now optional in this world apart,
Her calm breathing would keep me asleep.
As she expired my head would go down,
Inspiring me to finally, drop my guard.

When the sun filtered through the blinds,
I knew the best was coming.
That she would open her eyes
And already start talking.

But a week ago, she stopped smiling,
Turning to the other side in her sleep.
I would stare at her back for hours.
Trying to distinguish the rhythm of before.

She woke up before the sun and left me, here, awake.
Waiting for her arms to come back.
Praying that this was only a break.

Judge's comments: Cyril succeeds in exploring the changing rhythm of a relationship. He uses the senses to root us to the subject's feelings, such as "tempo" and "melody", giving a musicality to the time that evidently passes from stanza to stanza, and words of sight and touch to lend weight to loss and desperation.

College Short Story

1st place

When the Bombs Stop Falling

Nicolas Terzopoulos

What could it be?

Was it the trembling of the tunnel's walls? Or was it the total darkness, the complete obscurity hiding anything and everyone that might be before them? No, what summoned the most fear was not knowing when it would end, not knowing what would be left above them after the sickening hum that shook them to their core had run its course. For now, they waited in that dark, dusty, moldy tunnel for the assault on their livelihood to finally end.

It all happened so fast. It spread virulently, taking over city by city, country by country, creating terror as is passed and leaving rubble in its wake. No one could've prepared for such a terrifying beginning to a new decade, and they all knew that whatever the outcome, life wouldn't be the same as before this all started.

At this point, no one could even remember what the small, chubby man had said. Did he really have a plan? Or would the rest of their lives be burdened by prolonged sabbaticals in the Tube to escape a most certain end? No one knew. No one knew what it would look like this time. No one dared imagine. No one dared glance at the happenings of the city —or what used to be the city— they all called home. All they wanted was for it to end, for everything to go back to normal.

What even was normal?

They all had a vague memory of what life used to look like before this all started; it wouldn't go back to that, now would it. Friends were unrecognisable, not only due to the incredible change in spirit caused by the inescapable periods of isolation, but also because of the gas masks the Prime Minister said they should all wear. Apparently, dust created by the destruction could be dangerous.

The masks also offered an escape. An escape from having to smile. An escape from having to stand behind a facade to make yourself and others think that *everything will be okay*.

It provided a vail behind which despair and desolation alike could duck and cover, projecting only blank, expressionless faces.

But nothing could hide the pain in their eyes. Nothing could mask the constant fear; the inescapable trauma, the irrevocable feeling of seclusion witnessed as the blood-shot gates to their soul would water and send streaks down their pale cheek's crest. Drop by drop, turning the chalky streets below their feet to a sea of mud.

As the hours passed, the deafening mechanised roar faded in the distance. More and more people started to appear, leaving their hiding spot in the dark, snake-like underground to discover a Home in ruins. You could hear the clear, almost rhythmic, piercingly distinct thud of knees hitting the ground. A sound that, for most, meant loss. Loss of goods, loss of what some had worked so hard to achieve, loss of life, loss of hope, loss of everything that makes one human. A loss of all sense of good and evil, making them question if they deserved what was becoming of their lives, or if they were just an unlucky bunch doomed to see what they cherished most crumble to the ground. More and more violent sobbing, horrifying screams, strident cries could be heard; words were whispered as loved ones held each other while trying to tear their gaze away from the destruction and death surrounding them.

What the hell do they do now?

Who would know? Who *could* know? Is it time to rebuild, knowing that it could all be for nothing if that airborne pest decided to stop by again? For now, everyone seemed to just want to let themselves be mesmerized by the minuscule flames suffocating under the mounds of debris, giving off thin trails of thick, grey smoke. Standing there. Wondering, contemplating, remembering. The only light in their eyes being the faint flicker of the dying embers.

Sooner or later, the cool midnight breeze would brush against their cheek, and they'd find themselves without a home, without shelter, shivering in dirty, worn-out boots. Where would they go? Who could even help? They just stood there, aimlessly, as police and soldiers marched through the streets to the beat of the fire sirens. Uncertainty haunted them. Fear of the unknown occupied every ounce of their beings.

Before long, people started looking up. Observing more than just what was theirs. Seeing that they shared the feeling of mourning with everyone around them: neighbors, friends, family. Words were exchanged. Warm embraces were locked. All while some frantically searched for loved ones in the streets, or under the rubble.

Almost as fast as the infirm amount of calm and consolation set in, the skies started rattling, trembling, rumbling as the infernal hiss of death retraced its prior route. Sirens whaled. People rushed, grabbed their things and their loved ones. Running, looking for an entrance to the city's retched basement that they urgently needed to find. Everywhere you looked: pushing, shoving, falling, until the lucky ones finally made it to safety. Every other second, the earth would shake to its core.

Crying, screaming, shrieking, along with the lifeless roar above left them all in shock. Some were praying. Some, trying to sleep. Again, they had something in common, something they could share: their deepest desire. They all wanted it to end. They all hoped this would be the last time. The last time they'd be here. The last time they'd be trapped. The last time they'd be stuck wondering whether it was all worth it.

Judge's comment: This powerful text allows the reader to imagine a "terrifying beginning to a new decade" which may or may not be fictional. The author's descriptions illustrate the destruction of a city and the dehumanization of individuals in parallel. Rubble hides loved ones, and gas masks cover expressionless faces. In just a few well-crafted paragraphs, we experience a seemingly endless story with all our senses. Bravo!

2nd place

To Those Who Showed Patience Towards Me, I Am Forever Grateful

***J*essica Xie**

In a previous version of my memoir, I was telling all my woes and how I came to term with them.

But I believe nobody really wants to read about a 17-year-old complaining about how unhappy she used to be, as she just kept going and going and her grumbles never seemed to stop. So here I am, rewriting a new version of my memoire, with an exclusively abridged version of the tales from my unhappier years. Yay!

I made this choice after realising that my struggles themselves should not be at the center of this written piece, since feeling down during teenage years is in the generalities, a universal experience. I did however have to include some to show the contrast between how I used to feel and how I am doing now.

This text does not serve a guiltripping purpose. It is rather my attempt to show a glimpse of hope for those who cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel. The idea came after many long discussions with many different people around me, including friends and a Secondary 3 class that I was invited to speak to about my Secondary school and Cégep experience. It was clear to me afterwards that many more people around us are struggling with mental health issues than we know. As a mental health advocate, I take this problem to heart, and I want people around me to get better. It does get better and here is my journey.

In spring 2020, my class had the opportunity to write a letter to ourselves that would be read five years later as time capsule. When the pandemic happened, the opportunity was taken away from us. Although at the time I did feel resentful about this missed occasion, I am no longer upset about it, because deep down, I know what I would have written. It would have gone with the lines of "Are you feeling better now? How did you go through these last few years? Are you proud of yourself?" Essentially, checking up on my declining mental health of the time.

If I start from the beginning of this hell of a teenage ride, here are the things that you should know:

1. I did not have many friends in the beginning of secondary school and often felt out of place.
2. In Secondary III, I only slept a total of 10 hours on the final week an important team project was due. This resulted in me experiencing hallucinations for a while, and a MASSIVE burnout.
3. Despite all the hours I put in schoolwork, I still had bad grades.
4. I had a low self-esteem and was unhappy for several years.
5. I lost interest in the things I used to love.

There, let’s keep going.

The end of my Secondary III was a rough time for me.

I started to think that people were all self-centered and selfish and ultimately all hypocrites. I believed I deserved more credit for what I do and more respect than the way I was treated.

In the meantime, people started to point out that I was gaining weight. I succumbed to my low esteem. I started skipping meals and would often inflict pain on myself. I only saw pessimism around me with no hope in sight.

It was a tough summer spent between fighting with my parents and with myself. I started ignoring all my friends and enclosed myself deeply into my mind.

I felt miserable and overtired.

However, one thing did temporary pull me away from my thoughts that summer – the three days of volunteering I did at a homeless shelter. It must sound cliché to say this, but they were the best three days of my summer 2019. I realized how grateful I should be for having my own room in a cozy house, never being starved for financial reasons and being alive.

Nevertheless, the most eye-opening thing I discovered about myself is that helping others makes me ultimately happy. It makes me feel useful. It was a great way to improve my mental health.

Holding tight to my newfound life drive, I started Secondary IV in September 2019 optimistically. I was dreaming of acing all my courses while maintaining the extra curriculars that I had newly joined. I also tried to be nicer towards my classmates and to give a hand to those in need. But I quickly lost all the hope I had built up and it all vanished.

My classmates were self-centered as ever and I could not even look at my grades anymore. I was well below the class average in all my courses on my report card, despite putting an incredible amount of effort. Again, I felt utterly useless and powerless.

Days started to get a darker and longer and my troublesome behaviours came back. I was short-tempered and often broke down at school. But nobody ever noticed. I do not blame them because I hid it. I did not want to be pitied.

Then Covid-19 swiped the world.

While moving to online classes, I had once again completely given up on my studies. I was frustrated with myself, but I genuinely could not catch up with my schoolwork afterwards. In maths for instance, I understood so little of the new content that I could not even ask for help – I did not even know what questions to ask to begin with. I ultimately finished Secondary 4 still very much below average in all my lessons.

I fought a lot with my parents. Each time, I wished I could tell them about my personal struggles but would retract every time, fearing how they would feel about it. Disappointment? Sadness? Pity? It did not matter. The huge uncertainty scarred me. When the summer holidays came everything went calm again.

The atypical school year was finally behind me. *Bon débarras,* I remembered thinking after logging off from my last Moodle test.

It suddenly felt like sea waves retracting from the shore and finally letting the sand breath. It felt so calm that you could finally hear all the cries of seagulls you never noticed.

That was when I began my reflection.

I had let myself down which resulted in my declining relationship with everyone but especially myself. It affected my poor school performance and it made fights between my parents and I practically part of my routine. My loathe for my flaws was eating me from the inside.

I wanted to put and end to this misery.

I wanted things to change.

I had gathered so far that helping others made me happy.

Things were going to change.

And so, when September 2020 came by, after having spent six months isolated from the outside world, I went back to school with only one thing in mind: focus on what makes you a better person.

I had realized that the only person that I wanted to surpass is my old self.

I never ever wanted to see myself in that poor state again.

I wanted to leave behind me my powerlessness, sadness, and self-hatred.

—

I found pictures of that summer while cleaning up my phone storage the other day. My room was a carnage. I do not recognize anything in those pictures - neither the poor state of my room, not myself.

—

Secondary V was a success.

I loved showing up to class early to enjoy the feeling of an empty classroom. I loved participating in class discussions. I loved all my teachers. Essentially, I had never loved school as much as I did in Secondary V

However, I always asked questions when in doubt, partially because deep down, I was afraid to fall back into how I used to be. I felt like part of my subconsciousness was still marinating in my 2019 pain and waiting to strike me back.

I knew I was not flawless and was slowly learning to accept that.

I had new classmates and went forward to meet each of them. I took the time to get to know each and everyone of them and always made sure that those around me were fine. I constantly checked up on those who sat by themselves during breaks because I knew more than too well the feeling of loneliness, being ignored, and being looked upon of.

I always offered to help to my classmates and to my surprise, many of them also helped me in the most unexpected times in return. It was a true blessing. In that class, I felt right. I felt that was my place.

Suddenly, one day, I grasped that had found my life drive again. I thought I had lost my *Eros* forever. But here it was, blooming and spreading inside of me like a wildfire.

I was finally happy.

When school went back online, it did not affect me as much as the first time did. I unironically found it fun and less stressful. I even managed to score my personal best school average in three years while balancing a good and strong relationship with everyone.

June slowly made its way into my school year. The thought of being a graduate was becoming clearer and clearer. I would be lying if I said I did not feel nauseous about it. I could not imagine myself letting this beautiful year end. Graduating made me anxious.

In the meantime, many brighter things kept my mind busy – I had received several awards from teachers who wanted to congratulate the efforts I had shown in their class during the entire school year. Some of them were so unexpected that I burst out in tears when I came back home that day. To think that two years earlier, I thought I would never make it, now talk about being rewarded! 14-year-old me had never seen this day coming and I am glad she had stayed.

I eventually graduated on June 19th, 2022. When I went up the stage and held my diploma, I felt a numbing happiness because again, I thought I would never see the day of my graduation. I was so proud of how far I have come.

It was a gratifying few weeks for me.

The end of August came by quicker than I had foreseen it and it meant the end of my summer holidays. I was starting Cégep, which I was extremely afraid of.

The first few weeks were harsh. I missed very dearly my friends who went to other schools and was not accustomed with changing classes and classmates so often. I felt a lot of pressure and could sense my unhappiness rise again. But to my relief, it dissipated quickly.

I felt nothing during my first semester. I was neither excited, nor sad. I felt painless.

I was studying Plato's philosophy of happiness at that time, and he defines happiness as the absence of pain. I believe therefore that the absence of concrete happiness despite de absence of affliction in my life meant that I had finally reached the real state of happiness.

I am still healing, but I have reached the philosophical state of happiness after over two years of unsettling feelings.

Okay. Now what?

I want to thank everyone who showed me patience, because you allowed me to build myself back up. I am glad I crossed path with you. You may never know how you have helped me in my catharsis, but you did. And for that, I am and will forever be grateful for the time you granted me. Thank you again and take care.

Farewell,

Iscah U.H. Gilles

Judge's comment: By sharing a personal journey, the author demonstrates that she is a mental health advocate. Her struggles on all fronts are progressively revealed to the reader, accompanied by sparkles of hope and gratefulness. In a moving way, the author discovers the beauty of helping others and surpasses her younger self. The text is an open time capsule that we can all learn from.

3rd place

A Problem to Solve
Maxim Nejelski

Michael came back from the bathroom and saw about a dozen faces looking up towards a glowing screen. He took a seat near his friend Dave who rebuilt his bathroom last year.

"You, you, think the Habs gonna w-win the cup, Dave?" slurred Michael as he finished his fourth shot of rakija.

"Ya, why you askin'? Evvvvveryone in this bar thinks so," replied Dave, still looking at the game on the television.

"OK, but you, engineer! You, smarter than m-me, and them. Unless…"

"What did ya say? Unless what?" said Dave as he frowned his eyebrows and turned his head towards him.

"Nothing, Dave," replied Michael as he drank another shot.

"Say it!"

"You…You *really* want to hear the truth? I said unless a writer sees fa-facts more clearly than you!"

"A writer don't see nothin' but his pen and paper! And anyone can do it—easy!"

"Wrong, Dave! I bet you couldn't write me one pa-page without giving up halfway through and going back to calculating numbers!"

"Wrong, Michael! If the Habs lose to Tampa, I will prove it to you! I'm sure they will lose so bad that they will get a short, overachieving pee-wee hockey coach from Quebec! If they win, then I want you to treat me and missus to a spa day!"

"Deal."

They downed their last shot for the night.

"My head hurts, Emma."

“Don’t tell me you went out drinking with your writer friend again…” “Yea, I did. I’m sorry.” Dave lay on the couch. He felt as if he were on a kayak riding waves and yesterday’s six tacos with extra chili sauce inside of him wanted to see the light of day once again.

“Honey, do you mind bringing me a book?” asked Dave.

“What? Are you okay? You hate books!”

“Bring me a book! Anything!”

“Since you like numbers…Here, *1984.*”

As soon as Dave picked up the book, he didn’t get up from the couch for many hours. Occasionally he let out a sigh. However, when he reached the long, tortuous excerpt from Emmanuel Goldstein’s *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, dominating the ninth chapter, Dave let out the longest sigh his wife had ever heard. He wanted to throw the book onto the kitchen table, but he was so exhausted that it slipped in his hands and landed on his face, losing the bookmark which he didn’t need anyway.

“I’m done with this crap.”

“Dave, I’m telling you! Just write about something you like!” says the writer. No answer from Dave.

“Alright, you can stop if you want,” the writer chuckled.

“Thanks for the advice. No,” says Michael as he hangs up.

The next day, being the engineer that he is, Dave attempts to wrestle with the blank page again. Before writing anything, he takes the first page to write a plan like he used to do during exams in engineering school.

Known:

5 sheets of white paper

2 pens

I like civil engineering and woodworking

Unknown:

First sentence

First paragraph

Title (last variable to find)

My imagination

Problem:

Write one page as fast as possible

Dave writes, “I love building things.” First sentence is done. “Good work,” he thinks to himself. He considers writing the rest tomorrow. Then he remembers how Michael chuckled during the phone call. “Michael, do you really believe engineers give up that early?” he thinks. Then, Dave writes, “A proper foundation prevents bearing failure.” The engineer realizes that the publishers won’t know what he is talking about, so he writes instead, “Buildings are heavy and exert forces on the soil. Those forces must be distributed evenly. Sometimes, the force is so big that it causes the soil to rupture and the building sinks into it. If the foundation is deeper, the soil is more compact and can resist better. Now, imagine a soil that has more humidity, like quicksand. When you put something on top of it, the soil fails quickly! A buddy of mine, won’t say his name, proposed once to build a thirty-floor condo on humid soil without draining all the water! Can you imagine what would’ve happened! When I asked him about it, he said, “I forgot about drainage. Maybe I saw it in school, but I don’t remember anymore.” You cannot forget these things! Anyways, it may sound simple to you right? You find good soil, drain all the water, then make the foundation as deep as you can. Haha! Sometimes it’s not easy like this! You must also take into consideration the weight and the force of the foundation itself, which is more important when the foundation is long and deep, as well as the cost of everything! Engineering satisfies problem solvers.” Dave is exhausted and goes to bed proud of himself.

Dave skips his morning breakfast and his woodworking session to correct a few grammar mistakes. He takes the crumbled piece of paper and makes his wife read it before answering any of her questions. After a quick read, his wife, being an expert reader, says, “Dave, this is interesting, but you ought to make it *alive*. Give a name to your building and imagine it’s a human! Show what the building must live through. I think that would be interesting.”

“Just like engineering,” thinks Dave. “You create something, show it to colleagues, they don’t like it, and then you improve it!” He goes back to his woodworking room (he changed the poster from “woodworking heaven” to “writing cave”) and imagines humane qualities to buildings. He takes new paper and writes, “The buildings are trying to survive just like humans. On a cold day of January, such as those in Montreal, the water molecules in the soil slow their movement and hook onto each other to form solid blocks that expand. The building feels something pushing against his feet, being the foundation, and it moves. However, this building, forced to live in Montreal, faces more than one challenge. God blows winds into it, hoping it will fall, so humans cannot reach heaven in their mortal life.” Dave imagines Hemingway looking in awe at his story from heaven. Even him wouldn’t have thought about this—let alone Michael.

“Emma, check this out! It’s a jaw-dropper!”

“No way… Did you buy me an extra-large chocolate-dipped ice cream cone?” replied Emma with enthusiasm.

“No… Vanilla paper dipped in Hemingway’s prose.”

“Oh…Your text again? Aren’t you tired of this?” She gave a few nods as she skimmed over his story. “It’s alright. But I know how to improve it even more. Listen, imagine each building is a different person! You know how some people are short and bulky, others are long and tall, like our neighbor Jake? I suggest you try this idea. I’m sure you can find something.”

“What? I have to do this all over *again*?”

“No, not everything, just change up some bits! For instance, you can keep the setting in Montreal and show how each building experiences winter differently.”

“Good idea. See, that’s why I married you!”

Dave returned to his desk, slammed the door with passion, and yelled out loud, “Now this is going to be the one, I feel it!” He dropped his gluteus muscles so fast on his homemade chair that it broke like a Jenga tower. “Too bad, I’ll stand!” Dave picked up his pen, aligned the sides of the paper parallel to the sides of the desk and cleared other pieces of crumbled paper. Dave thought, “Perfect, let’s do this.” When he was about to write, his pen faced an invisible barrier protecting the paper. All his momentum collapsed in front of the blank page. He empathized with his chair’s collapse. “Haven’t I faced this feeling already? Yes, I have!” He picked up his previous text and started with the following: “On a cold day in January, such

as those in Montreal, all buildings felt the freezing water push against their feet." Look, I wrote one sentence without planning! Don't stop! He continues, "They also felt water vapour trying to squeeze through the brick walls. The amount of water that passes through depends on the clothes that the buildings wear." He remembers Emma's advice. "Older buildings have holes in their brick clothes, and that allows water to enter and freeze. New buildings receive more attention and money. On top of better clothes, they're covered with waterproof creams that prevents moisture from moving in." Dave realizes he needs to add more diversity. He writes, "What fascinates me, as an engineer, is the diversity of buildings. My neighbor's house is messy: windows aren't symmetrical and the door squeaks whenever it swings open. You could blame it on the winter blues, but it's the same in summer, except there is grass instead of snow in the front yard! You can tell it's going through a difficult time…The squeaking makes you think that it is crying for help. Sometimes, as engineers, we provide therapy for the buildings and make them feel better by changing their appearance. No one wants to show their scars, and buildings don't want to show their cracks either. As engineers, we can also create different personalities. My other neighbor lives in a house with glass windows and big garage doors, often partially open in the summer where kids would storm in and out playing tag. The gardens are colorful and inviting. You can tell that this building is extroverted. Emma's parents live in a condo. I've never seen a building as confident as this one. A building this tall and imposing shows stability like no other! You'll never see the same building twice, just like you wouldn't see the same person twice. On top of that, buildings evolve through time just like humans."

"Dad, someone is knocking!"

Michael rushes to the front door and stares into the peephole--the house's eye.

"Hey Dave," says Michael as he opens the door. "By the way, sorry for setting such a difficult bet. You don't have to keep going if you don't—"

"I wrote the text Michael."

Michael gave him the same look that Dave imagined Hemingway to have.

"Oh… Come on in!" said Michael. He turned towards his kids and said, "This is Michael! Remember the engineer that rebuilt our bathroom?"

The two friends sat on the kitchen table and drank tea. The writer didn't say a single word until he got to the middle of the text, "Dave, I'm impressed. Frankly, I didn't think you would be able to pull it off. Do you mind teaching me how you rebuilt our bathroom after I finish reading it?"

Judge's comment: After losing a bet to his writer friend, an engineer unwillingly distances himself from calculating numbers to write a story. Confronted by five intimidating blank pages, the engineer progressively transforms an objective narration into a metaphorical story. Buildings have feet, wear different clothes, and go to therapy. The author's humour and the evolution of the characters make this a very enjoyable text.

From the Archives

The Fall of Schildenstein

Thomas Bogdaniec-Fournier

Part 1: Awakening

Walter was laying in the ruins of a cathedral, surrounded by dozens of dead soldiers. He was a tall man for his time, about six feet, and wore a stylish monocle bearing a golden chain. Hearing coughing from behind the altar, Walter slowly rose from the mud, as dark clouds were raining on the bodies of the French and the Germans united in an apotheosis of absurdity, the favorite meal of the crows. Clutching his Grasser 1871, a six round revolver that was given to him by his father before he left for the front, he progressed silently to the altar, which was at the center of the nave. Turning the corner of the altar, he saw a young man of his age, struggling to breathe, dressed in the characteristic blue coat and red trousers of the French army, pointing a rifle directly at him. The boy was trembling, obviously terrified and cold from his soaked clothes. Lying against the back of the altar, his chest was heavily damaged, most likely due to a bayonet charge from the looks and the shape of the wound. Walter closed his eyes, focusing on the trickling rain, until he heard the thunderous sound of a firing rifle. The last thing he saw were the dull and lifeless eyes of the French boy glaring at him.

Walter suddenly woke up in his bed, filled with horror. He never got used to this memory, despite having relived it countless times since the fateful moment. His hair had grown quite long since the last days of the war, but he would still do everything he could to avoid remembering this particular event. He never left his revolver very far, as the insecurity he felt in every setting since then outmatched his fear of fire weapons. Having been raised in a lower aristocratic family, Walter's formal education

dissuaded him from talking about the atrocities he witnessed. His father's death – his sole remaining family – in a bank robbery a year before, certainly didn't help his condition. He lighted a candle, deciding he would rather read until the morning than risk seeing more of his past through his dreams. As he was absorbed by Allen Poe's tantalising words, someone knocked on his door:

"*Ritter* von Hutten? Something terrible just happened... The Baroness wants to see you. Please, time is of the essence!"

Walter dressed as fast as he could. Despite the urgency in the voice of whom he recognised as Günter's, the Baroness' servant, one could not present himself before such a lady in a night gown. He buttoned up his elaborate white shirt, put on classy black pants, shoes, a hip holster which held his revolver, and a long black coat before heading for the door. He nearly forgot to bring his cane, which hid a mechanism that would release a sword if the pummel was clutched correctly. He opened for the servant, who was dressed in his usual suit, one, Walter figured, that he must either always wear or own several copies of. In any case, Günter seemed a devoted servant, he was always ready to meet his lady's needs, most of the time before they were even worded. He had never shown any sign of emotion for as long as Walter had known him, and yet the candle he was holding was shaking as he spurted out his lady's demand:

"Forgive my intrusion at this hour, my good sir, but the Baroness wants to see you immediately! She asked for you to meet her at the stables as soon as you can," he said, horribly pale.

"The stables? Please Günter, tell me what happened," Walter asked stoically.

"The horses, sir, have all been murdered..." The servant was now looking sternly at the floor.

"Show me the way, quickly now lad," said Walter, while encouragingly patting his shoulder.

Part 2: Castor and Pollux

They raced down the hallway and went down stairs. The castle of Schildenstein, located deep in the Schwarzwald forest, about 15 kilometers to the south-east of Todtnau, was the seat of the house of Köchel, a very old family of Austrian descent, for hundreds of years. One could find, until the bombing of Lahr, during the Second World War, in the archives of Baden, that the first Baron of Schildenstein, Karl von Köchel, said "the Mad", was given the small barony for his outstanding assistance during the Black Plague epidemic to the Count of Baden himself. Dating from the late-medieval era, the keep changed allegiance with the ages: from the county of Baden, to the kingdom Baden-Württemberg, to the German Empire and finally to the contemporary Weimar Republic. Yet, the defences of the keep never failed to repel the invaders, were they rival lords or warring countries. Protected with a single row of walls, which were about 10 meters high and 2 meters thick, the castle had the shape of a square with archer towers at each cardinal point. Several buildings remained inside the keep, pushed against

the walls themselves, with a four floors fortified mansion located at the center, the ancestral residence of the von Köchel. It was a miracle of logistics that such a castle could be built in such a remote place, but the defensive advantages far outweighed the logistical inconveniences. It was situated on a hill, surrounded by vertical rocky cliffs on all but one side, the gates, where a serpentine road made out of pebbles would lead the traveler to the nearby village, about a kilometer to the south, which bore the same name as the keep. However, it was entirely abandoned, in 1920, due to the economic crisis that plagued the Weimar Republic. The Baroness, also known as Edith von Köchel, was also greatly affected by the crisis, she had to sell most of her inheritance to keep the castle and lived with in the most minimal maintenance since the end of the Great War: she had only one servant left, her loyal Günter, a cook and a groom named Hans... Everyone else had left following the severe but necessary cuts to their salaries during the previous years. The late Baron, Friedrich von Köchel, had been a dear friend of Walter. They fought together on many occasions, and would often play chess during the spare times, until the Baron was killed in action at the battle of Verdun, some years ago. When he died, it was Walter himself who was sent to deliver the news to the Countess. She was ever since very fond of Walter… They spoke for entire days about Friedrich, as it seemed they each had a very different version of the man. Yet, both would agree that he had been a highly educated and cultivated gentleman. Since this first encounter, Walter was invited every summer for a few weeks at the mansion. But something was different this time, and Walter could not help but be filled with a feeling of dread as he approached the stables. The moon was dimly lighting the courtyard, which was saturated with the smell of dead animals. The Countess, dressed in a fashionable dress, intercepted him:

"Thank God you are here Walter! I had Günter call the Todtnau Police Department, but we were warned no one would arrive until this morning. I am sure they are coming as fast as they can, but perhaps the killing of horses is not enough of a priority to them… Those who did this deserve to be punished. Castor and Pollux, my dear husband's horses, should be avenged, and you would have all my gratitude if you could help in this investigation," she told him, through the tissue she held against her mouth and nose.

Walter briefly saluted her before heading inside the stables. The smell was nearly unbearable inside. Even during the nastiest times of war, he rarely saw something so crude, so cruel…What was left of the horses was unrecognisable, their body parts were spread out all around the place, half eaten by God knows what... He also found, lying on the ground, long black feathers. Deciding he had seen enough, Walter headed back outside:

"What do you think about this, Walter? Perhaps it was Hans, the groom, who did this after all," the Baroness suggested, with a hint of anger in her voice.

“Where is he? I thought he was supposed to keep check of the horses,” Walter replied, somewhat unconvinced by the Baroness’ suggestion. He knew the groom well enough to know he would never have the guts to do something so inhumane.

The Baroness walked with Walter to the entrance of the mansion, followed closely by her servant. She told him, “He is in the kitchen with the cook. He had to be restrained for his own good, the boy has gone mad. He was in the middle of the corpses, mutilating his arms and repeating the same word over and over when we found him.”

As they arrived in the kitchen, Walter saw for himself what the Countess really meant. Lighted by an oil lamp on the table next to him, the groom, who was restrained to a chair with ropes, was severely injured to the arms and had an insane look in his eyes. He was whispering some unintelligible words, perhaps of an unknown language, while looking at the flames of the foyer straight in front of him. Walter watched in disbelief what had become of the carefree boy that used to talk to him for hours about politics, mostly about the teachings of Marx, “Unbelievable… What word was he saying earlier?”

“*Nachtkrapp*”, whispered the Countess.

Suddenly, the lamp oil exploded to pieces and Günter’s candle was extinguished by some unnatural wind. Walter had a flashback of the battle of Verdun. Before the initial French assault, his position was under the constant fire of the enemy artillery for hours. In his hideout, the lights had gone out, and eventually the entire structure collapsed. He passed two days under the rubbles, drinking dripping rain and waiting for the sweet release. Eventually, he was rescued, but the thought of darkness and tight spaces made him uncomfortable ever since. Everyone in the room stood still for a moment, and all that could be heard was Hans’ continuous whispering, until Walter took out his lighter to light Günter’s candle. Then, taking out his tobacco box and a pipe, he sat on a chair and proceeded to pack his smoke. It was an old habit from the trenches, which used to distract him from the bombardments. It relaxed him enough to speak, for his heart almost stopped even if his face remained as stone. “*Nachtkrapp*, right? I know the fable... It is about a huge crow who eats children at night. It is just a story that used to scare kids from misbehaving, but I believe someone truly wants us to believe that some mythical creature has come back to hunt us down. The perpetrator, and his accomplices, if he has any, left some black feathers in the stables to this effect. While far from being an expert in this matter, I have known personally quite a few lads who went insane during the war, and I would not believe Hans to be so good an actor of madness as he is right now. So, whoever did this managed to sap our groom's sanity very quickly, going so far as to force the *Nachtkrapp* into his mind. We are facing well prepared criminals of a caliber that may surpass our capacities by far. But this does not mean that we do not stand a chance. Their intent is clear to me, were they simple robbers, they would already be gone with

the horses… These men want more, they are sadists who are waging a war of terror, they want to play with our minds and they will not stop until they hunt us all down. If at any time, my initiative is an inconvenience to you, dear Baroness, I will stand down, but I do believe you have called for me because you think I am the man of the situation. I might not be that man you are looking for, but tonight, I must become him, or we may very well all be dead before the police arrives. Now, Günter, go back to that phone and make it clear to the Todtnau Police Department that our lives are in great danger and that we need their men here as fast as possible, then bring all the weapons that are at our disposition back here."

Without a word, Günter raced to the second floor to reach the phone. While he was gone, Walter addressed the cook: "Peter, for forty years you have served the owners of this mansion loyally. I believe you and Günter are not responsible for this tragic event. Now, this place might be a stronghold, but we need every defense we can have right now. I want you to barricade every issue and let no one in or out except me. This iron front door is the only one that will be used until the policemen arrive."

Günter, out of breath, interrupted their conversation by dropping all the weapons he was carrying… Most of them were decorative at best and were left aside, but the cook decided to take a ceremonial mace and Günter soon went back for his wood-cutting axe. Günter had a scary look on his face. He looked as if he met death in person moments ago. With a shaking, excusing tone, he muttered: "The phone would not work, someone must have cut the line…"

"No matter… Baroness, I know these are too crude weapons for a lady of your worth, but you must defend yourself. Please, accept my revolver for your own safety," Walter proposed, almost imploring her to take the gun.

The Baroness gently declined the offer with hand gesture, before addressing Walter: "No, I will take a sword and stay here with Günter and Peter, as you said. If you are going back there, you need this gun much more than we do... Here are the keys for the towers. By all means, take a torch, and most of all, be careful."

With a flaming torch in his left hand and his cane in his right hand, he looked back one last time to declare grimly: "I will make sure the front gates are closed and attempt to find the vile scum who killed your husband's horses. If I am not back in an hour, I recommend that you take the necessary precautions against a direct attack on their part." He stepped outside and gazed at the moon. When he heard the last lock of the metal door of the mansion being locked behind him, he set off into the obscurity.

Part 3: The *Nachtkrapp*

The frontal gates were closed, and the wooden beam, held in place by two metal hooks, which would serve to keep the doors closed, was intact. Walter's suspicions were confirmed, the criminals must have

used ladders to go over the walls. Strangely, he felt as if someone was spying on him. He went up the courtyard stairs and started to explore the walls, searching for ladders or a clue that would indicate their passage. He turned around several times, expecting to find a murderer after him, but he found himself alone with the moon every time. As he was reaching the eastern archer tower, he heard a harsh caw, which he reckoned must have come from a crow above him. Raising his torch, he saw, on the conic roof of the tower made out of red tiles, hundreds of crows all looking directly at him. Walter could not believe his eyes, surely his imagination was playing tricks on him. He had unreal experiences in real life, which often followed events that reminded him of the war, but it usually had no connection to reality: he sometimes felt as if a bombardment was going, and once thought he had seen a French soldier in a street of Magdeburg, but he had never seen something so real, while so impossible, right before his eyes. He felt very uncomfortable, if not oppressed, by the silent gaze of so many eyes. They could see right through him, they knew all about him in an instant. He slowly took a step back, and another, until he bumped into something entirely unexpected. Walter was so surprised, and his nerves so shaken, that he fell on his back and dropped his torch as well as his cane upon turning around. He found himself facing a very tall man, about 7 feet high, with a large brown beard. He had a black mask in the shape of a crow, which reminded Walter of those that medieval doctors would wear during the plague. The stranger had a long light brown coat and a cleaver dripping of blood in his right hand. Walter pushed himself back, using his feet and his hands, until he found himself lying against the tower. Clumsily drawing his weapon, he fired a first round into the man's shoulder. The sound of the shot resonated in the entire castle, driving the mob of crows into a furious cawing whirlwind. His vision obscured by the birds, Walter could barely see the man as he fired the next round, which hit one of the birds. He was in panic, he had no control over the situation whatsoever. He fired another round, and another, which only drove the crows more furious. Suddenly, the masked man emerged from the mass of birds, seeming completely unaffected, and sent the revolver flying with a swing of his cleaver before Walter could fire the last shot. The bearded man raised his cleaver, slowly and in a ritualistic manner, ready to split Walter's head in two. Before he could do so, Walter's reflexes kicked in… He grabbed his cane, clutched the pummel, and countered his attack with the blade that was released. Taken off guard, the man stumbled back into the mass of panicked birds. Walter tried to get up, but he was blinded by the crows and had to protect his face with his elbow. Moments later, he felt the tight grip of the man against his throat, and was sent flying against the wall, losing consciousness upon the impact.

Part 4: The Investigation

The first Sun rays were piercing through the leaves of the Schwarzwald as *Hauptmann* Hegel's car made it inside the castle. The first policemen had arrived a few hours before, but they didn't expect to

find themselves locked outside the castle. However, they managed to find a ladder, in the nearby village, high enough to get a man inside. What they found was nowhere near solvable, everyone was dead except for an insane boy tied to a chair. According to the forensic investigator, the Baroness, her servant and the cook had met their end to the same weapon as the horses, which he judge to be most likely something close to a butcher's cleaver. The last one, a young man identified as Walter *Ritter* von Hutten, had killed himself with a revolver, a few hours later.

After hearing the reports of his men, dropping coffee on his uniform and nearly chocking to death on a donut, *Hauptmann* Hegel, who, needless to say, was in a bad mood, went to his forensic investigator to vent off: "What am I supposed to do with this? It makes absolutely no sense. We found no traces of a ladder, so he either had an accomplice on the inside or he was a bloody ghost! Who would do all of this, without even stealing anything? I'm thinking it could a scheme of the communists, but this doesn't explain how one of the witnesses could be pushed to insanity, and the other to suicide… We have absolutely nothing, no clue or trails to work with, and this man could be in Switzerland right now for all we know!"

To what the forensic investigator, used to his superior's rage outbursts, replied calmly: "For all we know, what the boy says could be the truth, maybe it was the *Nachtkrapp* after all…"

Judge's comments: ''The Fall of Schildenstein'' is a testimony of the author's passion for history and his rich imagination. The supernatural interventions that occur within the well-defined settings create an atmosphere where reality is ambiguous. The imagery is beautiful and often gruesome.

2022 Reflections Writing Contest Judges



Jeremy Cohen teaches ESL at Brébeuf's high school level. He relishes in torturing his students with surprise quizzes and overly descriptive Gothic literature. Besides teaching, Jeremy enjoys writing (you can find his first novel, **An Apocalyptic Legend**, at the Brébeuf co-op) and playing substandard, painful and improvised ambient keyboard music as part of a Montreal band.



Emma Doubt is an Art History professor in the Fine Arts Department at Dawson College, and an Editorial and Education Associate at the Art Canada Institute. Her background is in literature, art history, and education. She has a PhD in art history from the University of Sussex (UK), as well as an MA in art history and a BA in literature and art history from McGill University in Montreal.

Amélie Jackson teaches English to Brébeuf's College-level IB and DEC students. The very first Languages Department chair, she is the source to consult whenever colleagues have questions. Arguably the best read of the English teachers, Amélie completed her own Book-a-Week-for-a-Year challenge. Seen with here is Otis, faithful guardian of the palace.



Juan Fernández González studied *Sciences, Lettres et Arts* at Brébeuf (2014-2016). He participated twice in the Reflections Writing Contest, winning three first prizes in the Advanced English category. Juan obtained a B.Sc.



Architecture at McGill University in 2019 and is now pursuing a *Master in Architecture* at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. He believes that architecture, from the scale of a door handle to that of a city, always tells a story.



This from Margaret Zhou: I'm very honored to be one of the judges of the English Writing Contest, having participated in it a couple of times while I was studying in CEGEP. I now look back to the time I spent writing for the contest and all of my English classes very fondly, for they enriched my Brébeuf experience and cultivated my creative thinking.

Giuseppe Di Lonardo is a Brébeuf alumnus whose passion for English and theatre has kept him active in the college's ongoing activities as the founder of the CÉGEP Thespian Theatre Troupe and co-founder of the high school's Stagestruck Productions troupe. He is currently taking a hiatus from the Montreal film industry to focus on developing digital mediation platforms for museums.



As a somewhat rudderless young man, **Neale McDevitt** had no idea what he was going to for a career, as his BA in Literature was not exactly the Great Door Opener he thought it would be.

Following stints working in a machine shop, working on a beer bottling line, and handing out towels at the YMCA – among other places – McDevitt stumbled onto writing.

Skip ahead 30 years McDevitt – albeit a more grizzled version – is still writing. Not only has he been writing for all those years, he's actually made a career out of it. Having just celebrated his 15th year as editor of the McGill Reporter, the official journal of McGill University, he spends his days telling stories about impossibly accomplished people doing impossibly wonderful work.



McDevitt also dabbles in fiction. His debut collection of short stories, *One Day, Even Trevi Will Crumble* (Exile Editions), won the Quebec Writers' Federation First Book Award in 2003. He wrote it when he was single and unemployed, and he thought "this is so easy."

Today, as a husband, a father of three and an employee at McGill, McDevitt doesn't have much time to write fiction. But he still cooks up some wonderful stories in his head.

Many thanks for your considerate investment of time and the pertinence of your feedback to our writers.

Special thanks to…

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Thank you to our faithful sponsors

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