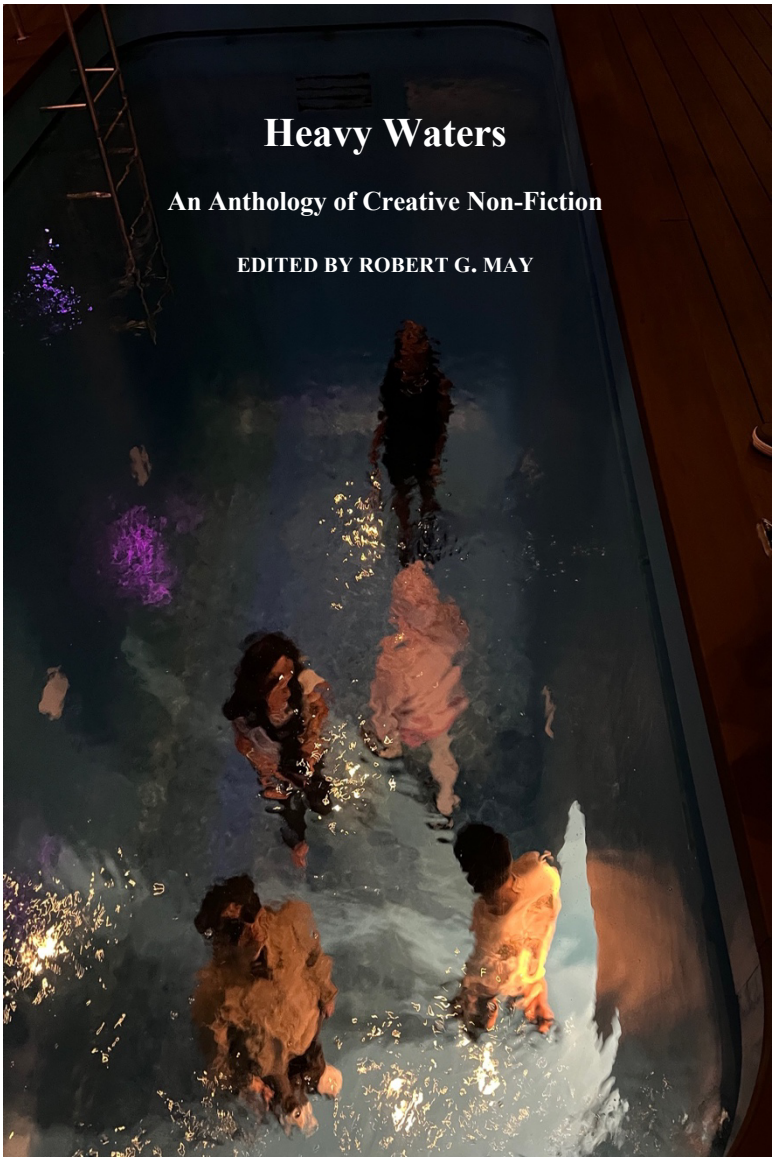
Heavy Waters
An Anthology of Creative Non-Fiction
EDITED BY ROBERT G. MAY

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Preface

ROBERT G. MAY

Heavy Waters is the seventh anthology of creative non-fiction produced by the students of my Writing Creative Non-Fiction course at Queen's University, Kingston.

In this seminar, students learn the craft of writing creative non-fiction, one of the fastest growing genres in the world today. What is creative non-fiction? What are its defining characteristics? What subgenres are associated with it? How is it structured? How does it communicate with the reader? These questions and others are answered through a close study of Lee Gutkind's *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* (2012), one of the most popular creative non-fiction writing manuals on the market. Gutkind is the founder and co-editor of *Creative Nonfiction*, a renowned journal that has been publishing in the genre for more than thirty years. *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* takes students through each step of the writing process, from planning, to drafting, and to revising, providing them with the practical tools to hone their creative-non-fiction-writing skills.

Students also have the opportunity to read numerous examples of creative non-fiction in *Slice Me Some Truth* (2011), an anthology of recent Canadian creative non-fiction edited by Luanne Armstrong

(University of British Columbia) and Zoë Landale (Kwantlen Polytechnic University). Both editors teach creative writing at the university level, and both have published widely in creative non-fiction and other genres. Among the works anthologized in *Slice Me Some Truth* are Susan Glickman's "Found Money," a compelling meditation on the importance of appreciating the experiences that money can't buy; Stephen Osborne's "The Man Who Stole Christmas," a touching tribute to deceased friend in the big city; and Ayelet Tsabari's "You and What Army," a harrowing tale of one woman's experiences in the Israeli military. Each work showcases an example of a creative non-fiction technique we learn about in class: writing in scenes, showing rather than telling, balancing public writing with private writing, among others.

Writing is a process, so my Writing Creative Non-Fiction course is structured to reflect this process. First, students learn how to plan a creative non-fiction work by engaging in a series of brainstorming exercises designed to make them think about various creative non-fiction topics and subject matter they may be interested in writing about. Second, students are asked to engage in research, immersion, and other information-gathering activities to help flesh out their ideas and expand them into the public realm. Third, students draft a rough copy of a creative non-fiction work, practising the techniques they learned in class and integrating elements from their research and immersion activities. Finally, students revise their rough copy into a final version, carefully editing their work to respond to both higher-order and lower-order concerns. At each step in the writing process, I provide students with written feedback on their progress and, even more importantly, they have the opportunity to share their work with their peers in weekly workshop classes. Students' final, polished work of creative non-fiction is then published in this anthology with minimal further editing.

I chose the title *Heavy Waters* and the striking cover image of people submerged in water (both submitted by student Aaliyah Mansuri, thanks Aaliyah!) because they reminded me of one of the most important

creative non-fiction witing techniques: immersion. Immersion takes place when a creative non-fiction writer involves themselves deeply with a person, in an activity, or in a place to help them gain new perspectives on their own lives and experiences. Immersion enables a writer to think about themselves, their own lives, and their own milieux in a three-dimensional way, enabling their writing to resonate with a wider range of readers. In Writing Creative Non-Fiction, students practise immersion in the form of personal interviews with a subject germane to their chosen topic. I was excited to see that many students integrated what they learned from their immersion experience into their final project.

If you're interested in reading more excellent creative non-fiction by my students at Queen's University, you may download the first six anthologies in the series—*Through the Eyes of Ourselves* (2014), *The Scene and the Unseen* (2015), *Unearthed Treasure* (2016), *Spirited Words* (2017), *Truth Be Told* (2020), and *A Bend in the Sky* (2022)—from my departmental Web site:

https://www.queensu.ca/academia/drrgmay/e-books

Thanks for reading *Heavy Waters*. I hope you enjoy this anthology of creative non-fiction by a group of talented and dedicated writers at Queen's!

Queen's University at Kingston
Spring 2023

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to the hard-working and dedicated students of Writing Creative Non-Fiction who contributed their original works of creative non-fiction to this year's anthology.

And special thanks to the many Writing Creative Non-Fiction students who contributed ideas for the cover design and the title for this year's anthology. The title *Heavy Waters* is based on a suggestion by Aaliyah Mansuri. The cover photograph was also created by Aaliyah. She writes, "I took this photo … on a family trip to Miami at the Pérez Art Museum, and the people in the photo are my cousins. The exhibition is titled *Leandro Erlich: Liminal*, [and it focuses] on the way water works, and the sensory or spatial narratives it provides us with. *Liminal* also [includes] a number of optical illusion pieces, taking ordinary things and making them harder to perceive." Many thanks to Aaliyah for these excellent title and cover contributions, which complement each other beautifully.

Additional thanks to the Writing Creative Non-Fiction students who contributed the photographs and artwork inside this year's anthology: Sanjana Kalia, Olivia Vandenberg-Munroe, and Alison Walmsley.

Illustrations

between pp. 20 and 21

Sketch by Sanjana Kalia. Sanjana writes, “This graphite drawing features a European temple-like structure in which I aimed to balance styles of abstraction and realism. A creative choice of mine was to make the structure distorted, almost like a puzzle piece, to achieve my goal of incorporating different drawing styles. I composed this sketch during a time of stress when I envisioned myself being somewhere foreign. The temple in itself represents a symbol of peace, reflecting my use of drawing as an outlet.”

between pp. 39 and 40

Painting by Olivia Vandenberg-Munro. Olivia writes, “This artwork was created in April 2023 for the winter-term CWRI 272 class. It depicts a vibrant world seen through a keyhole. I was inspired to draw this piece by the personal essays in this book. Just as the personal essays give readers a glimpse into the lives of the authors, this artwork gives viewers a peek of a new world.”

between pp. 55 and 56

Photograph by Alison Walmsley. Alison writes, “This photo of University Avenue was taken on November 25th, 2022, the third anniversary of my grandfather’s death. The sky that night was a reminder that he is looking down on me, proud of who I have become.”

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She Wasn’t Supposed to Mess Up This Badly

SINEAD ALLEN

I KNOW a girl that feels more than most people. This used to terrify me. She knows better than to cry so much before your tears stop your vision and all you can see are better ways to stop feeling so intensely. However, this also used to make me feel good about myself. Not in a way where I feel better because I’m not the one who seems so sad, but in a way where it seemed as though when she cared about you, she decided to care a lot. I think that this is what kept us friends, for a while, at least. Sometimes, though, asking someone to care all the time is too much. And, sometimes, friendships have to end.

She wasn’t supposed to mess up this badly. She wasn’t supposed to be that reckless. I want to ask what happened, but the rest of my friends might see that as betrayal, and I’ve never been good at defending myself. I’ve been running it through my mind a lot. I’ve been thinking about how she was able to mistake his drunkenness for a yes, and our friendship for that lenient. I’ve also been thinking a lot about time. The time when I told her that she could be one of my future bridesmaids, the time when I knew our friendship wouldn’t last, the time when we were all continuing

a made-up friendship, the time when we couldn't do it anymore, the time when she told me, "Without you, I wouldn't have made it through high school." I guess making it through high school would be all she really needed me for.

I don't typically lose friends. I am too much of a people pleaser for that. But I lost her. In a sense, I guess, I am in mourning, grieving over a friendship that has died.

Grieving a friendship is normal and the grief will not be linear.

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Actually, psychologists have stated that social bonds are a necessity for human survival. Therefore, some bonds are going to feel rather deep, and the loss of this bond can cause a literal feeling of heartache (Schneider).

We were driving home, her on the wheel, which always scared me, me in shotgun, and Taylor in the back. I know this to be the last time I would see her. She began speeding up on the highway with careless eyes. I began imagining my parents' face if they found out I had died in an accident. She pulled out her phone and told me to put on one of her playlists. I couldn't help but let out a little laugh at some of the playlists' names.

"Crying in a Cool Way?" I look up and ask.

"That's my crying playlist."

I get the feeling that she listens to this a lot. I get the feeling that she was sad again. Taylor finally speaks up and asks her about her encounters the night before. She knew to say, "Probably shouldn't have done that," when providing explanations.

"You're right, you shouldn't have," I want to say back, but instead, the car is silent. Finally, she drops me off, and we wave goodbye to ten years of friendship.

My friend that is no longer my friend refuses to make my grieving process easy. She still talks to my mum. She still drives to my house, knocks on the door, and then talks to my mum.

Part of me doesn't understand why she would do this; however, manipulation was always her favourite game, with the people she loves being her favourite players. Part of me also feels like I can't be mad because I know my mum was really the only stable adult figure she had growing up. This makes a little more sense to me now. It's been researched and reported that children with emotionally unstable and unavailable parents can lead to a life of unstable friendships and connections (Spelman). Still, though, I feel left in the dark. When my phone rings and it's the usual "MUM" that pops up she'll say that my no-longer friend was over today.

"What did she say?" I ask.

No response. So, I ask again, and all my mum can say are superficial things like, "She just talked about her boyfriend and work."

I don't necessarily believe this. She is making my mother a liar, just like her.

Faith, our friend, that she grew to admire more than me, says that it is not easy to feel regret over this loss of a friend. I think Faith misses the friendship, just not who she's become. I can tell Faith is breaking when talking about her. I'm trying to learn to hate her as a coping mechanism, too.

I don't want to victimize myself. I definitely did stuff wrong. Maybe she was hurting too much to see how she was hurting me. Maybe she just didn't like me anymore. Unfortunately, ten years is a long time to know a person so well before one decides that a bad decision and cruelty is worth more than a friendship. Those weren't just ten years of her life; they were ten years of mine, too. I gave a lot of myself that I didn't know

I had to give. Now, I would like it back. But she can't give that to me. So instead, I'll reminisce, cry, smile, get angry, deny, and grieve.

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A Child in the Courtroom

BARRETT ARBOUR

> 2.1. The child should be able to "understand and respond to questions." (Bala, et al. 15)

THE WAITING room is packed with faces. Solemn statues that sit quietly with their heads in their hands among the brown polyester chairs. The beige nylon carpet recedes as their feet sink into it. I sit behind my mother, my favourite stuffed animal tucked under my arm, gleefully pulling crayons out of an unused toy box I dragged from the corner.

My mom strokes my hair aimlessly, her head slumping into the palm of her other hand, nodding forward as she scratches. Over and over and over again.

"Hello, sweetheart." A woman with soft lines approaches me. I think she had been staring. I look at her, my smile accentuating the apprehension in her eyes. "What are you doing here?" they ask.

She exchanges a few whispered words with my mom and turns to me, softly outstretching her palm. I meet her kind eyes as I take a coin-sized metal scrap from her. A small carved angel graces one side.

"It's a pocket angel," she explains. "Turn it around." The back holds a message of relief in carved letters. "Always with you," it reads.

I hear my name being called, another woman standing at the waiting-room door. She wears a badge. A blazer. A hardness. My mom holds her breath.

"Are you ready?" The woman bends down to my height as I let go of my mom's hand, taking hers instead.

"Yes," I reply.

Two plush chairs sit in front of me. Spots of bright red and yellow amid more brown carpet, and a towering beige partition. Out of my sight lies a courtroom, where the public viewers have packed into tight plastic chairs. The prosecutor shuffles papers and the crown moves silently. The judge sits in a raised wooden box above my eyes. But I can only see the chairs. The carpet. The partition.

The social worker gestures for me to sit in the yellow chair. I hold my stuffed bear close to my chest. In front of me are two closed-circuit televisions, turned off but buzzing lightly in the stale air. I dare to look at the omnipotent figure above me. I don't want to let go of the social worker's hand. The room smells like cedar. Like sweat. Like breathing.

"I like your bear, what's his name?" The judge smiles above me. The unease sloughs off me, onto the floor. I smile back. He asks me questions: my name, my age, my birthday, my favourite colour. I answer him happily: Barrett, eight, October 24th, purple. We chat merrily, like two fast friends on the playground, smiling up and down at one another.

3.3. A child "shall" be permitted to testify via closed-circuit television or from behind a screen. (*Child* 20)

The television whirs to life. A man with glasses and dark curly hair appears on the screen in front of me. Behind him, the vast room at my back opens up to me. He shuffles his papers, his eyes boring into mine. Dread soaks back through my feet, up my spine, and into my heart. My nerves have been lit on fire.

Danny Gunn doesn't say hello. Danny Gunn doesn't say he likes my bear. Danny Gunn doesn't ask my favourite colour. Danny Gunn clears his throat.

When he starts, his questioning feels like being pinched, a drawn-out, gnawing discomfort. He pinches me over and over and over again. He claws for clarifications. He grasps at inconsistencies.

"The abuse ended on your seventh birthday?"

"No, eighth."

"But you just said seventh." His questions become sharper, his tone even and unwavering. They cut deeper, daring to flay my chest wide open, forcing my words to bleed out in a gory mess on the carpet.

My mind is beginning to scramble. There's liquid sloshing around in my skull, begging to spill over the edge. I watch myself spring into focus on the second television. An interview recorded six months ago between a younger me and a bald detective. For two and a half hours the court sits in silence, as I listen to myself tell the same story.

I try to focus on the younger me, remembering how it felt to look into the sergeant's eyes. To point to the paper with an anatomical model of a young girl printed on it. To answer questions that didn't make me feel like I am being turned inside out. I feel so far away from her now as Danny Gunn's eyes dissect both versions of me. I wish I was back in that police station.

6.0. A child's testimony is to be individually assessed in the context of all of the other evidence, just as is the testimony of an adult. (*Child* 64)

Heavy sobs fill my chest as I heave over and over and over again in a small bathroom on the second day of my cross examination. My mom clutches me close to her chest, crooning soft comforts into my ear. But my mind is shaken.

I can no longer sit in that yellow chair behind the brown—no—beige partition. I can no longer watch my blurry self on the television. I can no longer feel my mind crumble as I answer the same questions.
I hear knocking in the distance.

"It's done," I think I hear the social worker say, but her words sound muffled.

We sit in our minivan in the courthouse parking lot. My mom, crying silent tears. My nana beside her, a palm against her back. Me in the backseat, face pressed against the glass.

I watch as the world outside our car breathes around us. I sit still, the scent of the courtroom lingering around me.

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Unfair Holidays

BAILEY BIEGANEK

I USED to throw fits on my brother's birthday. Colin was born on Christmas Eve, which means he opens his birthday presents before I get to open my Christmas presents. Different presents for different birth celebrations, but my tiny wails about the unfairness of it all have long since become a running joke in the family. I did eventually grow up and stop throwing fits. I learned my brother's birthday should be about him. But those feelings of unfairness can still linger, no matter how hard I try to stamp them out.

I won't dare speak for all eldest children, but I do think there is an undercurrent of unfairness that runs through our upbringings. Colin was always getting what he wanted faster than I did. He never played my games exactly the way I envisioned.

I sometimes envied only children, though a life without my brother would have been unfathomable. But so was divorce. Then it happened to me.

Divorce is actually very fathomable. There are endless studies and books to tell the tale. One such book provides the alarming stat that

around 2005, “about one in two new marriages [would] fail” (Wolfinger 2). At least half of my elementary-school friends at the time had divorced parents, and so would the entirety of my fourth-year acting class years later. Despite that, divorce always seemed like an invisible, illusive disease: impossible to pin down, impossible to accurately define to a kid. I got my chance to define it for myself in middle school. Lucky me. I wonder how many of those other divorce kids learned their parents were splitting on Valentine’s Day? I hope that statistic is low. I hope Colin and I are the only ones who’ve lived that truth. Lucky us.

Valentine’s Day in 2015 dawned as a quiet, lazy Saturday. I think we’d already had breakfast by the time the illusion was ruined—I’m certain I would remember being hungry when my world imploded. Colin and I had been talking about Valentine’s in the living room with the sort of early cynicism young teens like to practise. We were being flippant and fun because we had no clue what was coming. How could we? Who does?

Later, my brother will tell me he blames himself for asking my parents what they were going to do to celebrate Valentine’s, prompting their confession. I will think it’s ironic. He blames himself for when they told us. I blame myself for not predicting it at all.

But on Valentine’s Day 2015, my parents sat us down in our kitchen after Colin asked his fatal question. Moving there from the living room made this moment serious before I could articulate why, a drop in atmosphere. I remember my feet hovering in the air, like the tension that hovered around my suddenly subdued parents, because our island stools were too tall for me. Faced with their seriousness, I had the unavoidable thought that maybe they were trying to tell us someone was dying. Something was dying, alright, just not a person. My dad was struggling to get his words out, and then he broke down crying. I remember my own

throat tightening as shock made my hands grow cold. I had seen my dad cry twice before, but I would see him cry a lot in the coming weeks.

I don't remember exactly who said the word *divorce*, but it was a shot through the heart of our relaxed morning. Colin and I both burst into tears. He ran upstairs, and I moved to follow him down the hall. But I stopped. In that moment, I felt how unfair the difference between us could be. Colin's not one to talk things out, but I'm a proud problem solver. I wanted to follow him, to pretend my life could go on the way it had for a little longer, but someone had to make sure everything wasn't going to fall apart. The adults weren't doing that. Maybe they'd never been doing that. There were logistics that needed sorting.

Later, I will reflect on my first question to them: would Colin and I be split up? That's quite the far cry from the girl who couldn't stand to see him open his birthday presents a day before her. But in light of one unfathomable thing happening, I had to make sure another wouldn't. I had to hold on to what I could.

We weren't going to be separated.

"Where are we going to live, then?" My lip trembled on my second question. I begged it to stop.

"Here, honey," my mom said. "You guys won't be moving. Your dad and I will switch weeks in the house."

Oh. I couldn't even conceive of what that meant for the long term, but I now knew everything I needed to know. I was finally released from my self-imposed duty.

"Can I give you a hug?" my mom asked.

For the first time in my life, I said no. I followed Colin upstairs without another word. I laid on my bedroom floor and played music so loud I felt its vibrations through the carpet, willing the rest of the world to disappear until it was just me and guitar riffs from the nineties. I only made it through a few songs, though, before I dragged myself into my

brother's room. I needed to see him with the same crawling need I'd had to make sure we would stay together. He had turned off all the lights and was lying in bed. I crawled in.

What do you do when you have to live in the aftermath of a continent shift? You go to the only person experience has shown will always be there. Fairness be damned.

I told him we weren't going to be separated and not much else, but what I was actually saying was I'm here, too. We'll be together. Valentine's can still be about love. Your birthday will still be about you. I will make sure of it.

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Dancing Through It All

LEXI CAMERON

I AM a worrier. Mundane things that people overlook, I over-think to the point of exhaustion. The tightness in my gut is a familiar feeling. Like someone has a belt tied around me that they continue to tighten as more and more things begin to weigh on my mind. But what if the thing that stresses me out the most also provides me with the most stress relief?

Dance. I danced competitively from the time I was ten to eighteen. Dance became an outlet for me to let go of all of the things that stressed me out.

I was in the moment. Just listening to the music and moving my body. Anything could have gone wrong that day, but the minute I stepped on the dance floor in front of the mirror, it all just left me. The math test I bombed—gone with the limpness of my arm when I extended it to its full length.

Eyes locked with my own in the mirror, I would spot my turns. That was my only focus. Me. Turn and make eye contact. One time around. Two. Three.

Those moments in practice I was calm, collected, and knew what I was doing.

But then it comes time to get out on the stage to perform in front of who knows how many people. No matter how many times I do it, it never gets any easier. The feelings of anxiousness all come rushing back in one large wave.

I look around and see the other 20 to 54 percent of dancers (Mathisen, et al. 108) experiencing this in the dressing room as they fiddle with the sequins on their dresses. They pace up and down the tables of girls finishing their makeup.

Soon we will head backstage.

Standing in the wings looking out into the crowd it is pretty dark, but right up front and centre is where the judges sit. They don't just sit. They sit and they critique: what I am wearing, my facial expressions, if my technique is polished enough.

Palms sweating, face so hot it feels like it will ignite at any moment. The urge to pee—wait, no, maybe not. According to Helen Clegg and Lucie Clements, these are considered somatic symptoms that are produced from physiological responses and are more conducive to performing because they increase adrenaline (1). These feelings bring the energy deep down inside of me to the surface and allow me to exert every ounce of physical capability I have for the duration of the dance.

I focus on trying to turn my brain off. Cognitive anxiety is perceived as more debilitating to dancers, causing them to undermine their ability (Clegg and Clements 1). It is more difficult for me to manage the thoughts that run rapidly through my head, but if I do not try to gain some control, I risk psyching myself out.

I close my eyes for a moment. Deep breath in, deep breath out. I repeat this three times. The butterflies still swarm around the conservatory that has become my stomach.

My instructor whispers in my ear, “You’ve got this.” She knows I’m running through the routine in my head an excessive number of times to make sure I remember it.

“How does the dance start again?”

Then there’s silence. The only thing I can hear is my heart palpitating.

The lights dim.

I count myself in. Five, six, seven, eight. I get into my starting pose. Dancers always start with their back to the audience or head down. It has never really occurred to me the reason for this. I guess it is for dramatic effect.

I stare at a scuff mark on the black stage floor.

The music cues, and all of a sudden, my body knows what it’s doing. It is like when you receive an exam, and you know at that moment there is nothing else you can do except write it. All I have to do now is perform. The pent-up stress I formulated in the wings is flowing out of me now with every movement. The charge it leaves behind is what pushes me onward.

The whole time I dance I avoid making eye contact with the judges, like a child who is getting caught for doing something wrong. Partly because if I see their mouths moving as they talk into their microphones, there is a chance I will read their lips and my focus will shift from the dance to what I am doing wrong. Maybe they are complimenting me, but not likely.

It helps if I stare into the dark abyss of the audience, because then it is as though I am dancing for myself and no one else. It is like I am in practice, just letting go of everything.

It seems like I have been dancing for only a few seconds when the music ends, and I stand in my final pose.

There is an explosion of cheers, shouting, howling. It is at this moment that I feel like I have won the whole competition, whether it was my best performance or not.

There is a tightness in my throat, no longer from the anticipation. From the exhilaration.

I walk off stage and into the foyer of the venue where all of the dance moms are congregated. The cheering continues. I rush over to my mom, my biggest fan.

"How did that feel?"

"It felt awesome."

I head back to the changeroom where I take off my costume and makeup. Shedding these layers, I am returning to myself in my true form.

The air is no longer thick, and not just because the giant cloud of hair spray has finally settled—I will need to wash my hair multiple times before it is no longer crunchy.

I can feel my heart return to its steady pace. I feel this sense of satisfaction that grounds me in my passion for dance and the reason I continue to perform. It is after a performance that I can see how dance elicits flow, which increases well-being and counters the negative impact of anxiety (Clegg and Clements 2). I know this because I immediately want to go back out there.

It is time to celebrate with my dance family. Whether we win an award or not, we all achieved personal growth. That is considered a victory.

Performing is not easy. But I got through it, and I will do it all over again.

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Somewhat Self-Induced Suffering

JACK CIOTLOS

BEFORE I begin with this story I'd like to state that I'm not writing this so people will feel bad for me and I'm certainly not under the perception that I'm in some terrible situation because the world's a pretty cruel fucking place and I certainly didn't get the worst of it. Nonetheless, experiences are experiences and if the slightest drop of cognizance can come from unscrambling my disarrayed thoughts then I guess two years of isolation wasn't a complete waste of my time.

During the lockdowns my mental state deteriorated at an alarming rate. I don't want to say I suffered from mental illness before the pandemic because a more accurate description was that I dealt with it; suffering seems a bit dramatic. I'm just one of the 7,650,000 Canadians that deal with mental illness ("Mental"). It wasn't unfamiliar. I had dealt with this since the age of ten and quite honestly I thought I was through the worst of it by eighteen. I was wrong.

In the beginning of 2020 it started with little things. I developed a phobia of soap. I would study my hands after washing them to exterminate any looming transparent threats. This of course included

cooking as I had to clean, and any soap left in the pots would be boiled into a death potion that would damage me beyond imagination. Doing laundry involved getting detergent, which was a level worse. How would I make touching that okay? Washing my hands after. These weren't short periods of time. I would wash them for minutes on end like a brainless shadow of my previous self until they cracked and bled like I was wearing red gloves. I also became extremely germophobic and before I realized I had hundreds of these worries.

A moment came when I realized I was no longer dealing with mental illness. I was genuinely suffering from it. I came to this conclusion in the shower. It wasn't a fun little shower thought, however, it was because showers had become stressful beyond imagination. The anxiety of being clean was too much to bear and often I would scrub so much that I worked up a sweat while trying to become clean. Of course every bit of soap would need to be eradicated before I was released from the steamy prison. In the warmth of the water, compulsion called to me like a cold whisper.

I race bikes at a high level and I would be in the fourth hour of training on my bike and think, "Oh, no, I have to shower after this." Unfortunately, it didn't end there. The germaphobia became worse and I was obsessed with controlling any foreign threats. At this point my roommate developed mono and so anything public in the house became a threat. Inanimate objects that may have been brushed by someone's hand became untouchable with the idea of becoming sick. I spent a year using elbows or the outside of my shirt to turn on stoves, use the sink, or open door handles, petrified of touching contaminated areas. To be certain I didn't get sick I treated everything like it was a risk to my health. Something as simple as using the door handle would cause me to have to wash my hands and with my phobia of soap this would sometimes cause ten- to fifteen-minute episodes of anxiety habits. My anxiety of

different threats increased over the next two years. One worry causing the next in a sequential storm of positive feedback loops until there wasn't anything I could do in my daily life without triggering anxiety habits. There was nowhere to hide, not even sleeping at night. In a matter of months, two to three hours of my day were stolen from me—by me. I had created imaginary barriers around everything that I did. Controlling it became difficult, as I had strayed so far from reality that I no longer had a measure of what was normal. I had completely lost myself, falling through a chaotic tunnel of unassuring voices constructing new fears for my mind to consume. School work and training three to four hours a day were my mental break, and my personal life became work.

I felt like a slave to my own mind, as if I was being puppeteered by someone to complete mind-numbing tasks that I would have done anything to avoid.

Don't get me wrong. There wasn't some deep voice condemning me to do these things. They were thoughts my own mind had created, but there was a sadder, more anxious side to me that began to consume the wide-eyed ecstatic kid that existed just a few months sooner. The more I gave into the thoughts the more they came to me, spiralling things out of control at an alarming rate. These thoughts determined every possible risk and eradicated it. Just like I wanted, right? I had eliminated all risk in my life, but to eliminate every risk was to eliminate the possibilities and prospects that make the sun rising in the morning seem purposeful and kind of beautiful.

Now I'm not going to end this story on an uplifting note just because I've spent the last thousand words talking about depressing shit and I don't want the reader to electrocute themselves with a car battery after this, but because this is how I actually feel. I've spent the last three years fighting a losing battle here and every time I've attempted to improve this part of myself I've failed. This has been by far the hardest and most

trying years of my life, yet I'm left with the highest level of gratitude I've ever felt. There are better days ahead, and life will be so much sweeter now that I've seen a darker side to it. Recently this part of my life has been improving and I know now that not only is this beatable but that I will beat it. I will battle it and eradicate it unforgivingly just as it has done to me. One day I will wake up a different man who goes through the easy parts of life easily and puts the energy and time into the things that matter with the people that matter. I will hug my friends without viewing them as a threat or have a shower for the pure joy of it. I will join the party instead of spending my youth in a bathroom washing my hands, and embrace old friends with a worry-free handshake. I'll stop living in fear and break through the abyss of fabricated darkness coming back to meet my friends and family in the light. I've missed the sun. I will do all of this, and god dammit it's going to be beautiful.

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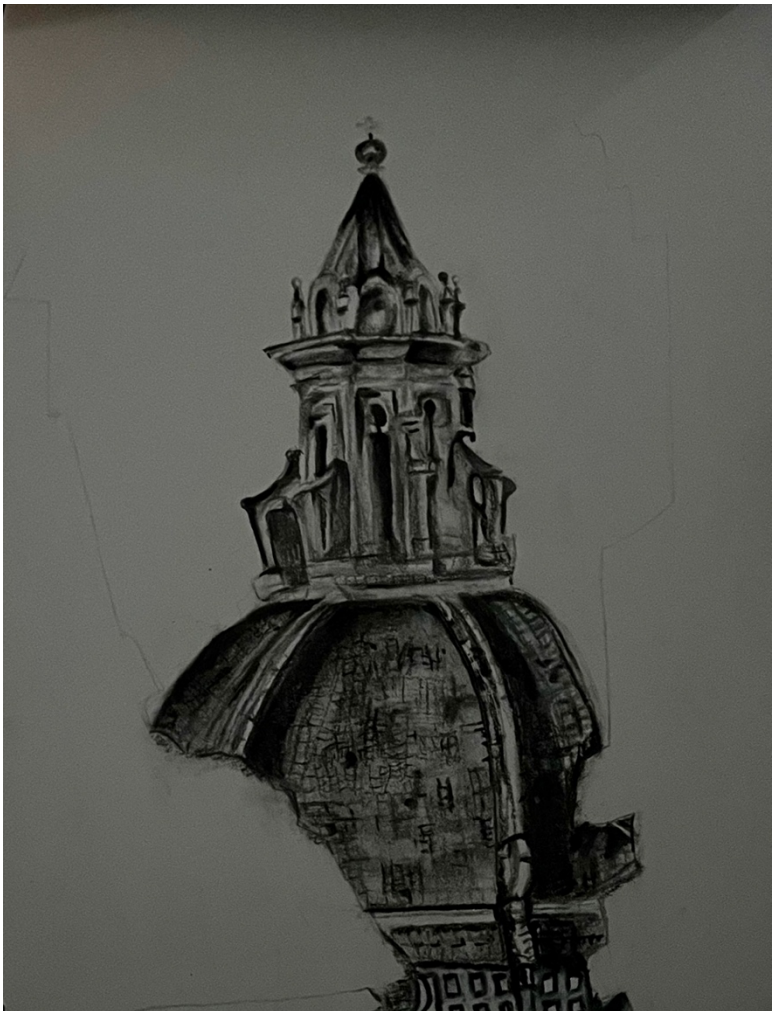

To Live and Let Die

NICOLE DANCEY

FOREVER IS a promise I once coveted, sworn with gifted necklaces of one heart split in two and vows made by hooked pinkies. “Best Friends Forever” is a fantasy little girls know all too well, a promise we made to each other in our naivety. But it’s been three years now since I’ve seen you.

We were three years old when we first met and ten years old when we joined the same class. A friendship was born, made up of secrets shared in bathroom stalls and snowballs thrown in a boys vs girls Hunger Games re-enactment at recess. The field was our kingdom and the shaded large rocks in the corner our castle. I taught you a handshake I learned at summer camp and made you promise not to show anyone, though you’d never meet the girl I learned it from. I’d never see that girl again, either, but I didn’t know that yet. We’d fight sometimes but all was forgotten by morning. Yesterday’s troubles were of no consequence to us. Not at ten years old, not between best friends.

When we were fourteen, we’d stay up till early-morning hours at sleepovers or on FaceTime. On the weekends we’d beg our mothers to

drive us to the mall or the movies. We did each other's makeup and ordered pizza on Valentine's Day, laughing about our periods and the boys we liked.

In high school, we skipped class in favour of coffee runs and suburban drives, blasting music and rolling the windows down, even on the coldest days. We got drunk in our friends' basements, hiding our Solo cups of raspberry Smirnoff from their parents. We were together more than apart, already having planned matching tattoos and the New York apartment we'd share in college. Forever promised a future of our paths intertwined. We thought we knew it all, intoxicated by our teenage egos.

But change is felt all at once, and we'd ignored it as it crept up behind us. The natural flow of our conversations became stagnant, stiffly replaced by superficial small talk. A tension remained that hadn't been there before. But maybe we'd ignored that, as well. Your parents were fighting, and you'd lost a lot of weight. I was struggling in my own ways. We all were. We'd hint at what was going on, but no one would say it. No one would ask. Communication was never a strength of ours, and the silence only grew louder. You preferred the company of your new friends and your boyfriend. That was fine. I found myself happiest when you weren't around. Change made us cold.

I thought if we left things unsaid it might pass. But all that was unspoken left nothing but empty space between us, haunted by ghosts of broken promises and fear of the future unknown. The simplicity of our pinkie-promised forever was left behind, too heavy to carry when weighed down by baggage we'd unknowingly collected over the years.

We spoke about it eventually. On an overnight school trip, sat on the bathroom floor of a board-game café in Guelph, we attempted to put ourselves back together. You said you felt abandoned. I felt the same, but I didn't say that. I didn't say much. But that's just how we were, even if I'd never noticed before. You would talk and I would listen. I wouldn't

offer but you wouldn't ask. The differences between us, the disconnections, were emboldened with age.

Even so, we pretended things were okay. I might have even believed it.

But it didn't take long for that false bridge to break, and soon enough the pandemic lockdown freed us from our forced proximity. There was nothing left to hold us together. Nothing but silence and space between us.

We're twenty now and we haven't spoken in three years.

There are no matching tattoos, and no New York apartment. We never could've afforded New York, anyways. Forever wasn't the only naive fantasy we held.

The breakup of a friendship is not one talked about often. It's not so dramatic as between lovers or riddled with the nuances of an estranged family member. But to quote Dolly Alderton, "Nearly everything I know about love, I've learnt from my long-term friendships with women" (5). You were one of my first best friends, and we came of age leaning on each other for support. But of course, to grow up is to change. Sometimes to grow up is to grow apart.

There is often no villain or objective blame to be placed when a relationship comes to an end. It was easy to make promises of forever before life began to fast-track, and the catalyst of change crept in. Easy to feel betrayed when those promises were broken. Back then if you weren't my friend, it felt like we had to be enemies. But how could I blame you for the inevitable? How could I not blame myself, if not at least partially? That space between us was coloured in shades of grey, no matter how black and white, right or wrong it appeared at the time. There's always an in-between. But I didn't know that yet.

In my naivety I revered the fantasy of forever, the idea that love was proven by permanence. Forever meant that I could hold on to everyone

significant to me. But growing up means "moving out of the realm of fantasy" (Alderton 26). Growing up means learning to let go, to live and let die.

Forever is not a simple promise. Forever is a weighted expectation. Easily twisted into an accusation, forever can become a reason to blame or to hate. Some things are meant to be fleeting. Some people are better off living in memories, frozen in your favourite version of them. Love does not have to be eternal to be significant. You weren't the first friend I lost, and you certainly won't be the last. But when I read the words, "We was girls together" (Morrison 1), I think of you. We were each other's girlhood. That's how I choose to remember you.

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Not Easy

MEGHAN ELSENAAR

IT WAS the morning of November 1st, 2018. This was the day that marked Canada's annual Take Our Kids to Work Day, where grade-nine students spent a day at the workplace. As I sat slumped in my chair, forcing myself awake as the darkened November morning haze seeped through the classroom windows, I suddenly became cognizant of my surroundings. My mother's voice enticed me, as it was bold and powerful in her delivery, coupled with her tender tone. No longer dazed and uninterested, I scanned the classroom. All twenty-eight children held their widened eyes on my mother, excitedly raising their hands in the air whenever she posed a question to the class about the lesson. She was the sunlight that allowed the sprouting flowers to blossom. Their petals developed vibrancy through her sincere praise, and their stems strengthened through her sustained support. I was utterly amazed. Her passion for her profession resonated with my fourteen-year-old self. She made teaching look easy. However, behind my mother's kind eyes and warm smile, there was stress. Teaching is not easy. In the twenty-first century, it is impossible for teaching to be easy. Rather, it is demanding,

exhausting, and underappreciated. You would think that those who are at the forefront of building a society's future would be given recognition, along with significant funding and support. But hey, what's more important? Increasing the education budget so that the next generation can thrive, or focusing on other aspects of our society's future—like a highway, perhaps?

In Ontario, educators are spiralling and quitting. They are tired of being the duct tape that holds the education system together, a product that is durable, endlessly versatile, and ridiculously cheap in proportion to its utility (Niemczyk). The students who compose the future generation of Ontario are depleted. Their dreams will soon break, as their needs continue to be strangled by neglect. This is Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative government's doing. In 2019, the educators of Ontario congregated at the picket lines, and 200,000 elementary and high-school students across the province took part in the #StudentsSayNo walkout to refute unfair contracts, rising class sizes, and cuts to the curriculum that target vulnerable students (Freeman). As usual, this causes Ontario teachers to be at the forefront of a politized media spectacle where they are demonized by the public. Naysayers on Twitter respond to those fighting for the future of education in Ontario by chiding, "Those lazy, entitled teachers, with their bloated salaries. Get back to the classroom. Stop pushing liberal agendas on the children of the future" (@1StarAtaTyme). In order to educate those who are unaware of what the educators are fighting for, let's make it clear: teachers are not fighting for a salary increase. No one becomes a teacher for the money. They are fighting to get their students the support that they deserve. Ford's cuts to the education budget are deplorable. Cuts hurt kids. In almost every televised news conference at Queen's Park, Ford delivers a plethora of false claims to the public about education. In 2020, he stated that the Ontario government has increased Ontario's education budget by

1.2 billion dollars, which is more than any government in the history of Ontario. However, Ford's claim was proven to be false, as only 133 million dollars of this increase would be allocated to Ontario's education system (Crawley). In 2022, Ontario's projected education budget was 30.8 billion dollars, compared to the 31.3 billion dollars projected in 2021. As a result, 500 million dollars had been cut from Ontario's publicly funded school system, as Ford's priorities lie in building Highway 413 ("Doug").

Various incidents occurred on November 1st, 2018 that drew my attention to the typical day of an educator. As Take Our Kids to Work Day is aimed at presenting grade-nine students with the realities of the workforce, the realities of teaching at a publicly funded school in Ontario became clear. In the morning, a misunderstood child threw chairs and flipped desks in the classroom, which resulted in an evacuation. At snack time, a child's lunch bag solely contained chips and cookies for a full day of nourishment. Throughout the day, the groups of desks that were planted on the tile floors remained occupied by twenty-eight tiny, squirming bodies of various behavioural and academic needs, making it increasingly difficult to give each child the support they deserve.

Despite the challenges of teaching that I witnessed that day, I could feel my heart begin to swell. The scorching heat in my chest, fuelled by the adrenaline that flooded my body, smothered me with both pain and elation. Pain for what these educators and children must endure, and elation for how uplifting these students made me feel. I felt a passion ignite in me. Commencing as a slow burn of curiosity for what my mother's career of almost thirty years entails, to a complete desire to pursue teaching as my future career—one of the strongest emotions that I have ever experienced. People often ask me why I want to be a teacher, their questioning feeling like an interrogation at times. They say, "Why do you want to be a teacher? The summers off? Seems like a relaxed

gig." Having had to answer this question on multiple occasions, it seemed as though I already had an answer programmed in my mind—an answer that averted from political stances and potential arguments. I respond, "It is a great career. Pension. Benefits. I will also get to inspire the upcoming generation." However, what I truly want to say is that despite the lack of appreciation that teachers receive, and the taxing days that they undergo, there is no other career that has gripped my heart and has shown me what purpose looks and feels like. This intensely burning passion, adrenaline, and desire to become a teacher still engulf me. Is teaching difficult? Undoubtedly. Am I still willing to undergo judgements and challenges throughout my future career? Certainly. Teaching is one of the most important careers, as it directly impacts society's future generation of children, nurturing, developing, and inspiring many. A truly fascinating career. On that note, thank you to the Ontario government for allowing me to participate in Take Our Kids to Work Day. Without experiencing the transformative day of November 1st, 2018, I would not have found myself pursuing this remarkable, important career—a remarkable and important career that you, and others, unfortunately lack the respect for.

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Lobster Bisque

SANJANA KALIA

"LET'S COOK something instead of going out. Lobster bisque, maybe? Homemade dinner rolls like they do at Red Lobster? Except it's more authentic this way."

Lobster Bisque! Who in the Gordon Ramsay does he think I am? If anything, I could be on one of those World's Worst Chef shows, but—

"Okay … sure … easy."

I watch him as he dances through the kitchen, knowing exactly what to sauté, season, stir, as if it is second nature to him.

"I would cook all the time as a kid. I'll make you my Bang Bang Shrimp one day. It's my signature dish."

I always did want to date a chef.

I always wanted a relationship that resembles the values of an older time. I listen to stories of seniors sharing their journey with their partner and how they are utterly committed to each other. Overcoming all the hard times together, and being each other's best friends is what it took for a husband to look at his wife and say, "We made it."

I know that divorce is something that wasn't accessible or accepted in their time, so I do not want to diminish the significance of it. However, there is an acceptance of quitting relationships now. There are superficial barriers that influence people to not want to stay together. I have grown up in a household where my parents are still together. I know this dynamic is no longer the norm, but it is something that I strive for. I listen to stories of their relationship. Authentic and resilient. The cultural barriers of strict Indian parents caused my mom to have to hide phone calls to my dad. The distance between them caused my dad to drive two hours every Friday night to see her. He never got any longer than a couple of hours with her. My parents fell in love and got married young. They had both lost a parent and had nothing starting out. They had to heal and grow successful together. I admire their commitment. Although my parents overcame the natural barriers of life, they were sceptical of my unestablished relationship at the time.

"You're being stupid, honey. You hardly know him," my mom said to me the night that I realized I actually cared about what would happen to us when we started university. We've been on a total of five dates before six minutes away turned into 626 kilometres. However, I think their major concern is the complications of dating today, in addition to withstanding the distance.

It is rare in our generation to find somebody who would put in the work to keep a relationship alive, let alone a long-distance one. This is a time of superficiality playing a role in modern love. A time when people are too consumed with themselves to want to make a meaningful connection with someone else. A time when people cannot be bothered to work hard for something, but rather have it revealed through a Google search. Although I sound old and grumpy, there is some truth to what I am saying. Young people are becoming dependent on "computer-mediated communication" ("Is"), causing a loss of authenticity and focus

on what truly matters in life. This form of communication creates more opportunity for people to not want a committed relationship by providing various means for depthless interactions with multiple people.

I have witnessed these surface-level qualities in many, but never my boyfriend. He does not remind me of anybody. He looks at life through the lens of old movies and talks in references I can never understand.

"I'll be back before you can say blueberry pie," I remember him telling me on his way out, and was disappointed in my hesitancy to catch on. He is completely out of place in this generation, which is what fascinates me. But what truly captures my intrigue—and I hate to say it, but even my heart—is that he is humble beyond compare. He is not consumed with himself. I have listened to him talk about his little sister for hours on end because he loves being a part of her growing up. He even named her. He is somebody who values every Sunday, praying with his dad that the Dolphins won't lose … again. But most importantly, he does not ask for anything but works for everything. He is the oldest brother of four, who would never want to worry his mom, so it makes sense. Although I absolutely admire his selflessness and independence, it almost scares me.

"You worry too much."

That's all he will reply. He will continue to wake before dawn to get a workout in. Proceed to do manual-labour landscaping for thirteen hours. Sit on the bus for another hour after a day like that. See me. Repeat six times a week in the summer. I have seen what days like that do to him, but he does not complain. As I said, he works for everything. I know it's going to pay off someday. He gets what he wants because he works for it. Hence, why he has me.

I am not going to lie and say that our relationship has been easy. We have completely different experiences with what we know to be love. My primary example of love is my parents, who have been together since

they were kids, while his is parents that separated because they got together as kids. His example is the norm in this generation, making him determined to have a different outcome. He is willing to take the seven-hour train rides and drives to see me for more than half the year. We are willing to sacrifice the time and money needed to ensure that we don't burn out. Money that we don't have. Although our reality is hard, I am dating my best friend, and he is worth anything hard that could arise. Understanding what he values in life, like his family, having actual experiences, and constantly wanting to better himself, has reinforced me to discard matters found on the surface. I am a complete person, but he pushes me to grow. We are authentic and resilient, which should be the standard in every relationship, as it is what makes it last.

"Next time, we have to cook the vegetables longer and blend in the oregano more."

Personally, I was impressed. Unlike him, my cooking talents consist of two-minute noodles. But this is a five-star meal. Hey, man, this World's Worst Chef can almost make lobster bisque now. The authenticity of this meal surpasses anything that would be served to me at a restaurant.

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Am I Hallucinating?

AALIYAH MANSURI

SHE TUGS so hard at my hair when she is curling it, I can't help but pull away abruptly.

"Aaliyah, how do you expect to get through life if you can't even sit still for five minutes?"

I'm annoyed. I can sit still, just not when I can feel the literal fibres being ripped from my skull. Six strands fall in front of me: the worst number in my repertoire. I see everything in numbers, and six is never a good sign. My inner monologue cautiously asserts this, telling me it's a sign.

I am part of the 2.3 percent of the Canadian population that suffers from OCD, and part of the more élite 1.6 percent that has the combination of a few forms of it. It manifests itself through compulsions from focusing on my bodily intensely, outer stimuli, fearing contamination, and intrusive thoughts (Osland, et al. 137). My brain takes my body for a ride whenever it wants, consent thrown to the wind.

"Actually, I don't even want to do this. It's dumb."

It is Day Eighty-Three since school has been cancelled. COVID-19 not only stole the day I have been waiting for since I was six, but has now confined me to my backyard, in a dress that I had to keep the tag on. I should be out underage drinking and celebrating with my friends, not being poked and prodded by my family.

I look at my phone, confronted with the reminder, yet again, that prom was supposed to be today. The letters are so big on my screen that it almost covers CNN's ominous notification on today's death toll—5,031. I loathe myself for how normal that number sounds to me. I'm thinking too hard about how easily I could be one of those statistics, or worse, my family. Now I'm breathing too quickly, too ragged, and it isn't right.

The root of all my intrusive thoughts is that something terrible might happen to someone I love. So, when my brain tells me to chew my food twenty-three times to avoid the unthinkable, I have to do it.

"Fine, just grab your headphones, maybe that'll help. You can't take photos when half your hair is curled—" Sania pauses. "You can't be serious, Aaliyah."

I got my first pair of noise-cancelling headphones when I was seven. I can still remember the day I felt the mind fog being cleared by Gerard Way himself.

I can tell by the shortness in her tone that she knows I'm about to flip out. I'm used to external frustration when I get like this, but it only exemplifies the coercive voice in my head calling me a burden.

Suddenly, I feel too aware of how fragile everything is, especially me. I hop out of my desk chair, Sania almost singeing my ear off. I don't mean to slam the door behind me, but I do in my pursuit to get out of the house. I'm wasting her time. The loathing sets in a little harder now, stubbornly settling at the bottom of my stomach.

I rush to put my sneakers on, deciding that going for a drive will calm me down. I shield my eyes from Mom so that she can't see them welling up. I refuse to deal with a lecture about how people have it worse than me right now. Am I not allowed to be upset that I'm missing out on a pivotal moment of my youth? "Class of 2020" has such a bitter ring to it, and not in the good way.

I pinch the laces to make two equal loops, noticing the freakish look of the aglet. I hate the colour and the way I tie them, too. I redo it. It still doesn't feel right. It's messy. I do it again, making sure the loops are like two delicate petals. It looks anything but flowery. I do it again, tears hot on my cheek, dreading the fact that I have to go through this torturous process on the left shoe. My stupid compulsion slows me down, just in time for Mom's unhelpful insight.

"Aaliyah, your hair—"

It feels like the transition from sane to spastic is anything but gradual. Mom notices and slides me my Velcro shoes. I damage the backings in the process of shoving them on, and the feeling of it on my skin makes me mentally puke. I dash to the car in my socks instead, ditching footwear completely.

COVID-19 is just really hard for me, said everyone ever. Where I used to have distractions, I now had nothing except my compulsions. I hate washing my hands four-and-a-half (yes, half is possible) times. I hate opening and closing my door until it clicks perfectly into the frame. I hate having to rewrite things just because the sound of the pencil doesn't scratch my brain in the way I need it to. Test-taking has always been agonizing for me, so maybe online school was a divinely given break.

"Papa, can you help me?"

I feel stupid as I exit the car after twenty minutes, having not even gone anywhere. I can't drive, let alone breathe, when I have a freakout.

In his hands are a glass of water and my headphones, leading me to the familiarity of the couch. The dark red colour of it mimics my flushed face. My dad knows when the compulsions are taking over and he has perfected the dance of OCD—somehow better than me.

Those who suffer from high-functioning OCD often have musical hallucinations, hence the gravitation towards it (McMahon 14.37). It's disheartening to think about my greatest asset in life as some sort of medical estimation, let alone a hallucination. I like to think of my relationship with music as deeper than that. When I'm going to sleep, drifting to the soft surf guitars of Mazzy Star, I imagine that I am anywhere else but my bedroom. Maybe the hallucination thing isn't too far off.

I shuffle my favourite playlist, which was basically curated for moments like this. That's the thing about streaming platforms: people can hyper-curate playlists to fit any sort of feeling (Warhaft). The average person usually has thirty to forty playlists in their library (McMahon 1.04.38), and I have 217.

I slip my headphones back onto my head.

The white noise in the background was anything but static now; it was a familiar tune, and I was dancing.

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Are You Sure?

TAYLOR MOORE

"WHAT'S YOUR backup plan?" my mom asked me as if I have ever wanted to be anything other than a teacher.

"Become a Rockette," I said with a smile. I laugh it off having given no true answer to her question because, up until that point, I hadn't put in any thought of what my backup plan would be.

After hearing that question, I started to worry if teaching was what I really wanted to do. What if I was just following the life I planned out for myself at seven years old?

Months before I had to get my university applications in, I started looking at all kinds of different programs at a variety of schools, even though it was my lifelong dream to attend Queen's University.

Evidently, I got bored of searching for a new life plan.

I eventually came to the realization that the reasons why I wanted to become a teacher all those years ago are still true to this day. I have always loved working with children, and I am reminded of that fact every time I step into a teaching role. I don't know why I would think any differently.

The truest reason for why I want to be a teacher is to create a change for the future generation of students, and that is exactly what I plan to do. I believe that education should not be focused on which student can memorize the most biology terms. Real learning happening in the classroom is what education needs to be about. It should be based on taking class concepts and utilizing more of the brain than just the hippocampus to regurgitate simple information that can be easily Googled. I want students to grow their minds through creative measures rather than completing tests all the time. I want students to engage with class content and real-world experiences instead of just staring at the wall all day.

"When are we going to use this in real life?" asks Jack, as he tries to figure out why there are letters in our math equations.

"Math is all around us and it is something each one of us uses every day," replied Mrs McDonald, addressing the entire class. We all roll our eyes in disbelief. This is a question heard often among our class.

"I feel like nothing we learn in school will be used in the real world," I whisper quietly to my best friend, fidgeting with the silly bands on my wrist. I always wanted to know how things in class related to the outside world.

I recently sat down with my friend Avery who shared the same view on the situation growing up.

"One of my teachers in public school would always ask my class what news we had heard that day to make sure we were keeping up with the world around us," Avery told me. "As a student, I really appreciated this because it forced me to have something prepared for the day."

"That is such a cool idea! I would love to use that in my classroom one day. I really want my students learning useful skills," I responded.

She agreed: “Me, too! I loved that it would get my brain working before showing up to school and because I always wanted to have something to say. I really would check the news every morning.”

The majority of information I learned in high school has disappeared from my head. All that remains is the information I learned from working on written assignments in classes such as English or social sciences. I couldn’t tell you much about what I learned in chemistry or math. It’s a good thing I decided not to apply to Con-Ed science. I could, however, tell you exactly what I learned in my grade-twelve English course. After learning about rhetorical devices, instead of having the class complete a test on the definitions of each one, my teacher had us write TedTalks, making sure we incorporated the different devices to make it more convincing. This was an extremely beneficial assignment to have us complete because it forced us to have an actual understanding of when to use each rhetorical device. The topic was also our choice, making the assignment more appealing since we could write about our interests. I of course wrote about the education system. I guess this is something I am really passionate about.

My Self as Learner class also highlighted the importance of real learning, and how to achieve such with all different types of students. I dove into the UDL Guidelines Web site that the majority of our assignments were based on. One of the guidelines that stuck out to me was number 8.2: “Vary demands and resources to optimize challenge.” This guideline states, “Providing a range of demands, and a range of possible resources, allows all learners to find challenges that are optimally motivating.”

This proved to me that real learning is much better than trying to shove all students into one box and expecting them to all excel. I always enjoyed when my teachers would provide alternative assignments because then I had the opportunity to complete the one that was best

suited to the way I learn. They could offer visual art assignments, technology-based presentations or recorded videos, written work, essays, and many other examples that could cover a range of skills. It is hard for teachers to accurately gauge students' application of knowledge if they are not applying anything at all, which is why it is beneficial to give out different ways for students to show their work.

I am extremely passionate about allowing students to complete the type of work that is best for them. I used to be one of those students who struggled completing certain assignments. I was horrible at essay writing. I still do not believe there is anything special about the way I write. Some days I would prefer to hide behind my screen and submit an essay, but other days I would prefer to get up and verbally explain why I think the things I do. Forcing children to continuously complete challenges they are no good at for grades is not going to magically make them better at it. It will make them believe they are no good at anything if they are never given the chance to try.

Teaching is what I was born to do. I'm sure.

The Rockettes can wait.

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Untitled

ABIGAIL TINKL

THE ROOM is spinning. Thoughts move faster than I can control, pulled into the whirlwind storm that forms inside me. As my mind rages, the commotion surrounding me begins to encase the room, a wall of sound dominating me, trapping me into the cubic space of my mind. I push the heels of my feet harder into the ground, hoping to gain stability, to stay rooted where I am, but slowly I float up and up until I am looking back down at myself stuck in a state of paralysis. My body shrinks to anticipate the damage of the catastrophes encircling, as life goes on around me.

In these moments, it is hard to feel like there is anything else. Is it always there? That voice in your head that interrupts like an unpleasant conversation with someone who won't let you get a word in edgewise. What does calm feel like? Is it silence? I am not sure if I have ever felt that. I do know what I have felt: nausea, dizziness, heart palpitations. Constantly, it's as if I am living in a state of danger.

Growing up, anxiety began as a lingering thought floating at the back of my mind. It didn't immediately smother me, I mean. Rather, it

was a feeling of constant incompleteness that tugged at me, slowly tearing a hole that I would repeatedly try to mend. I hoped these feelings would heal with time, but with every passing moment I felt I required more patching.

My first job felt like the safe place I had been seeking. Working as a library assistant, the four concrete walls became a sanctuary of a kind of personal comfort. I had access to all the information I could dream of here, and I often found peace between the stacks of books. My mother had been a librarian throughout my childhood, so the pages of a book felt like home.

Now I couldn't bring myself to enter the building. I sat stuck in the passenger seat of my mother's car, outside of the library. A metallic taste filling my mouth as I came to realize I had been chewing on my cheek. Paralyzed with fear, my body anticipated the crashing noises of people, and the bright lights that would surely turn me into a deer caught in headlights.

I used to love interacting with patrons, recommending books and directing them through the winding halls until they found exactly what they needed, maybe in the hopes that I would, too. So, when I smiled at a man standing idiosyncratically in one of the aisles, I didn't think twice. I wonder now if every predator remains hidden until they strike.

It was a sunny day, but it always felt shady in the aisles, like a large tree protecting me from the radiating sun. Today, the aisles felt towering, like the shadows of massive skyscrapers closing in on me. There was a lingering presence that hid behind my every step, running away each time I turned the corner. Until it looked me dead in the eyes. As I filled a hole in on the shelf, I felt a stare piercing into me from the other side. Then my stomach dropped. There, right in front of me, stood the stranger I had given my kindness to, his hands in his pants, with a violent expression on his face. His look was one I had never experienced before

and have never since experienced. In that moment, it was like the first time my anxiety had taken a concrete form, and my intrusive fears stood directly in front of me. I felt afraid and dirty, like I could feel filth penetrate me and the place I loved. I felt more incomplete than I ever had.

The experience took a toll, bleeding into all parts of my life. Everything became difficult, no matter the situation I faced. Constantly, my thoughts took control and I spun into full-on panic. Nevertheless, I was persistent. I tried in many cases to move on from this incident. Yet, as I pushed down my feelings, and attempted to laugh it off, I only seemed to unravel more. The burden of this feeling was wearing me down by the day, and my heart was not sure If I could bear it anymore. The feeling inside needed somewhere to go. I was scared. So I went to therapy.

Her name was Jessica. I spent week after week telling her what I had assumed were irrational fears, and she consistently validated me, affirming that everything I felt was normal. I told her about my job. Begrudgingly, I explained how I had to quit and uproot myself because my anxiety had become too much. All because of what had happened. I told her how much guilt I felt—glossing it over and putting a satirical lens on the story as I customarily had. When I stopped rambling, she paused, and gave me a soft look—one of warmth and solicitude.

"You need to forgive yourself."

Simple advice, she acknowledged, but explained that we have control over the voices in our heads. She stated, "When your mind is telling you something is wrong, just repeat back that everything is alright." For so long the voices in my head constantly berated me, critiqued me, told me I was a failure, and that everything was my fault. But I forgave them and told them that it was alright. I finally knew none of it was my fault.

Her advice helped me realize that even if I had to carry this pain, I had the power to control how it made me feel. I could change my perspective by caring for myself, simply offering myself compassion. I began to live for myself, rather than live in a state of fear. For the first time in ages, I was reading again, writing and painting, too. Occasionally, I would even visit my mom's library. I would spend days painting outside, being messy, and connecting with nature, unlike I had before. Creating became a physical outlet for me to bleed out my anxiety and face my fears. Before, I loathed the mess of painting, the feeling of paint on my skin, and the stains on my clothing. But I let go of the pressure, and the mess wasn't so scary anymore. I sat in a lush green park, legs sprawled across a terrycloth blanket. A large canvas rested on the tall tree next to me, and I smeared painted directly on it with my hands. Dipping a papaya in the reddy-pink mixture on the palette next to me, then lifting it and I pressed an imprint of it into the canvas. Bees swarmed the fruit, nearing my hands, but I didn't fear them. For the first time in a long time, I was okay with the dirt. As I rode home on my bike, perspiration dripping down my face from the thick summer air, I felt somewhat whole.

Roots and Wings

SOPHIA TISMER

MY MOM has a funny sense of timing.

All those weeks leading up to "The Day"—my departure to the other end of the planet—all she'd told me was, "Don't you dare fall in love with a New Zealander. I want to be able to meet my grandchildren." And now she chose the moment of our goodbye to impart her parenting philosophy on me to help guide me on my journey.

"You know, there are two things I believe every parent should give their child," she said in a choked voice.

"Food and water?"

Mom laughed through her tears, hugging me closer. "Roots and wings, honey. I believe I gave you very strong roots, and now I have to let you fly."

I was about to embark on a working holiday in New Zealand, not only a country I had never been to but also the literal other end of the planet. All my belongings fit into a seventy-litre backpack, and all the planning I had done so far was to book myself into a hostel for the first three nights.

I was equal amounts excited and terrified, both dreading and dreaming of leaving behind the security blanket that was home. I was craving freedom and independence, and more than anything a chance to get to know myself. At the same time, I'd never been away from home this far and this indefinitely before. What if I wouldn't be able to get by on my own?

I couldn't even use Google Maps without getting lost! But the alternative of staying and having to confront myself with the awful question of "What do I want to do with my life?" terrified me even more. There is a theory by psychologist Erik Erikson called the "Identity Moratorium," which I learned about in psychology class. It claims that every teenager encounters a period of anxiety about having to define their own identity (qtd. in Hampton). Erikson suggests time away from everything and everyone familiar to solve that identity crisis, and I jumped at the opportunity.

Once I arrived in New Zealand, I realized just how clueless I had been. I struggled to navigate the world of taxes, work contracts, and how not to get screwed over by your landlord. You need certain adult skills for that, and those aren't taught in school. But I felt so good accomplishing things on my own, finally independent to go wherever my feet wanted to carry me.

And New Zealand didn't make it very hard for me to turn my coming-of-age struggles into a fairy-tale adventure.

The landscape is almost ridiculously beautiful, and I can still recall it so vividly. Glistening silver lakes embedded into rolling green hills littered with fluffy white sheep, where the air is so fresh it almost hurts to breathe it in. I can still hear the strange calls of jewel-coloured birds, and waves crashing against onyx sand. I remember the deafening sound of a waterfall crashing towards the ground, and the bubbling of misty geothermal pools the colour of emeralds and rubies. The land where you

can experience four seasons in one day felt more alive than any other place I've seen.

That includes, of course, the Kiwis. They are friendly, easy-going folks, always joking around with a smile that is never far from breaking loose. Kiwis thrive to feel alive. From gumboot-throwing contests to rafting down waterfalls, they seek experiences to make their lives richer. Even their way of greeting is lively: "Kia Ora," which anyone from the cashier at the supermarket to the prime minister of New Zealand will greet you with, literally means to wish the essence of life onto someone.

New Zealand has a stable spot in the top ten countries that offer the highest standard of living. HSBC's 2021 Expat Explorer ranked New Zealand on the second place for lifestyle and third for best place to live overall (qtd. in "Balanced"). New Zealanders value a work-life balance with the emphasis on life, on spending time with loved ones, and appreciating the great outdoors.

I incorporated the Kiwi mentality into my life more and more. I started smiling at strangers and I felt amazing when they smiled back. I started respecting Mother Earth to the same degree I would a human being. I tried to be more easy-going, to the point where my boss at the orchard yelled at me to pick up my pace.

My mom's advice of embracing both my roots and my wings—balancing responsibility and independence—was constantly in the back of my mind. I tentatively spread my wings farther and farther until I was lifted into the flight of freedom.

Almost ten months later, I pressed my face to the tiny plane window to catch a last glimpse of the country that had changed me so profoundly. It felt so terribly wrong to leave now that I was feeling so comfortable with who I was, so confident in my own abilities and my independence. Trying to comfort myself about the prospect of having to settle down, I looked back on a conversation I'd had a few weeks ago with someone

I'd only known for a very short time but from whom I had learned something I would never forget.

"How did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Stop. Stop travelling. Give up your freedom."

Laura smiled at me as if she was reminded of herself in younger years. She was an ex-backpacker who had lived hand-to-mouth for the better part of her twenties, with no material belongings, making memories and living her dream.

"Well, I guess the thrill of it eventually wore off. I was craving stability. I lived for the moment for so long, and it was just time for me to, you know, grow some roots."

Her words rang a familiar tone—this is what I wanted, eventually. But right now, travel was a bittersweet addiction that had already consumed me entirely, and I was dreading the day I had to come down from my high.

Still, Laura inspired me. She managed to go from full-time vagabond to responsible primary-school teacher without any regrets. Knowing it was possible to have both in life made me feel a little better about going back home and giving up my freedom.

Maybe I could take Laura as my role model.

Maybe instead of chasing after my freedom like it was the air I needed to breathe, I could thrive in the balance of both: stability and independence.

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The Door

OLIVIA VANDENBERG-MUNROE

I TAKE my time observing the generic artwork lining the walls and pairs of boots scattered by the entrance.

"Ready?" Jo asks. I purse my lips, nodding gently. I tentatively follow him to the basement, taking the stairs as slowly as possible.

The basement is filled with strangers. At least they're strangers to me. They flock towards Jo as though he's some celebrity.

I, on the other hand, am left to fend for myself. I offer awkward smiles to individuals as I snake my way around them. I must be as transparent as cellophane. The people here look right through me.

They're busy. They sit with paper plates and use their hands or spoons to eat rice and meat. I can't help but think that if this were my home, they would have been severely scolded. I don't even have a plate and yet I can hear my mother in the back of my mind chiding me about table etiquette.

"Manners!"

It's a good thing she's not here.

When he finally escapes the herd of people Jo makes his way to me. Whatever terrified expression must be on my face makes him smile. He gently instructs me to sit in a cushioned chair on the outside of their circle.

"I'll be right back."

I feel my eyes widen as I resist the urge to grab his hand. Before I can say anything, he's gone. I make myself as small as possible as I observe my surroundings.

From my perch I can spot a table across the room. It's lined with a myriad of mysterious dishes and cups, but I can't make out the details.

It's dark. It's loud. I can't understand anyone. Their voices are muted by some imaginary glass wall between us. I listen intently for familiar words in the foreign language they're speaking. Something that I can relate myself to, something to bring myself beyond their walls. Ultimately, I'm left to wallow in the realization that there is none.

I have no idea who Manny Pacquaio is, and the only Bernardo I've ever heard of is not someone that could be discussed so jovially. Ultimately, I can only assume that the people they're referencing are not here.

A loud sound goes off from the front of the room. It takes a second for me to realize that it's the karaoke machine they've been fiddling with. When they finally connect it to the TV, I'm uneasy. I watch the microphone intently. What if it accidently ends up in my hands?

My stomach turns like a pancake being flipped in a frying pan.

No one notices. Instead, I'm dazed by their thunderous voices echoing throughout the room. The screen tells me the song they're singing is "Halaga." It's not in English, but their sorrowful voices seem to flood out from deep within their souls, and it makes me curious about what the song is about.

A heartbreak? Grieving? I have no idea.

I'm completely locked out.

The chill grows more prominent.

When Jo returns, he's carrying two red Solo cups. I've been to enough parties that I figure I can guess what's in them.

It's only when he hands one to me that I realize that I'm wrong. Another reminder that this is not the environment that I'm used to.

"What is it?"

"Buko Pandan."

I poke at the light green substance with a plastic spoon. The dark lumps aren't doing much to convince me it isn't vomit.

I hear Jo snicker and I have no doubt that he's deducted my feelings with a simple glance. It seems to be his insufferable talent.

"What—" I pause, failing to find the right words, "is it?"

I'm a broken record.

"A famous Filipino dessert. It's got buko and gelatine." His words are slow and purposeful. He's struggling to piece together a description, and it's entirely possible that he's never had to explain it before. Between songs I can see everyone else zealously consuming the dessert, the corners of their mouths stained green.

"Buko?"

"It means young coconut flesh"

I'm not quite sure what the difference between young coconut flesh and coconut is, but no one else is questioning its contents, so I stay silent.

"Well?" He gestures at it, "Will you try it?"

I shift back and forth.

His question attracts attention to us. For the first time narrowed eyes sweep towards me. I squirm under their expectations.

"I will," I insist squeakily. It prompts more people to take notice. They say nothing, but even from behind the glass wall I can sense their apprehension. I'm no longer cellophane but fluorescent. They not only

see me now, but they're taking notice that I'm unfamiliar, that I'm in a place I was never supposed to be. They're waiting for me.

I'm frozen.

"I know it looks gross but it's the best thing you'll ever taste," he tries to calm me.

I don't feel reassured.

I sluggishly scoop a minuscule amount onto my spoon, conscious of the eyes following me. I can see Jo's face twitch, a teasing disapproval of my antics. Despite the tension I can't help but let out a guilty laugh as I correct myself.

Not able to procrastinate any longer, I tip the spoon into my mouth.

The taste is bad. Its sickeningly sweet. My face curls before I can control it. My eyes dart around the room as I worry for a moment that I've offended them.

Then, suddenly there's laughter. My face flushes.

It's warm.

I'm met with the smiles of half a dozen people. Someone adjusts a nearby chair so that I am pulled into their circle.

"How do you like it?" they ask.

"Say *masarap*," Jo teases quietly.

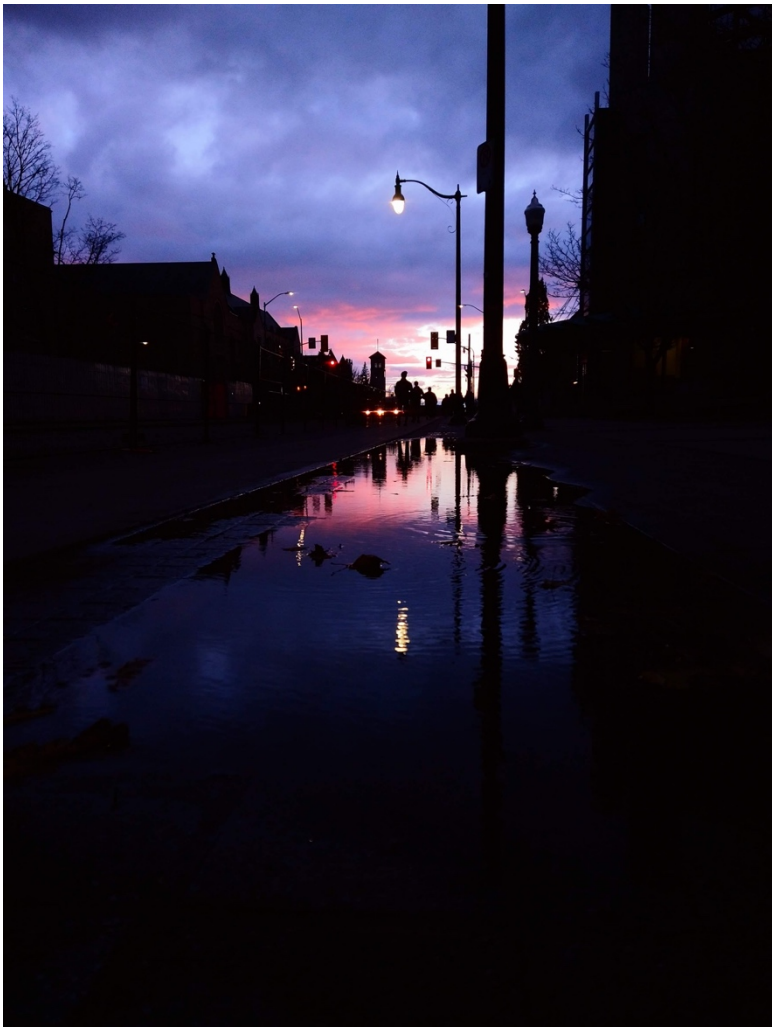
"Masarap?"

"Tastes good."

It's then that I realize that I've found it. The door to the glass wall. The chance to enter their world. I take another bite and think that maybe the sweetness isn't that bad. It's just different.

"Masarap."

I boldly step in.



Heirloom

ERIC VAN REMMEN

"MUST BE a new car," my grandfather said with a grin.

"Nope, it's a bike," countered my dad.

My grandfather was gifted a sealed letter for Christmas. It was the smallest gift under the tree, surrounded by gadgets, toys, and clothes for my younger siblings and me. He brings the letter close to his ear and flops it around so we can all hear. My typically pensive grandfather is excited; he's mature and knows the value of a gift isn't from its size or wrapping, but from its personalization and surprise. He calls one of my siblings for his letter opener in the cupboard and cuts the letter open.

It's an annual print subscription to *The Economist*, a British magazine known for its extensive coverage of global affairs, finance, economics, politics, and compelling cover art.

He was very joyful, despite his health in late retirement and the distance between his career of running a gas station and the magazine's contents. It must have been the Protestant work ethic in him. He would strictly adhere to his bedtime, routinely read by his fire, sunbathe naked

in his and my grandmother's fabulous garden, and enjoy philosophizing with my dad.

His stubbornness and characteristic pensiveness were his heirlooms to the family. In return, my dad entertained his interests and grappled with his depressions, which persisted until he died in 2015.

The Christmas during my first year at university made me feel embarrassed. Lacking money, time, and transportation, I only managed to command my siblings back home to buy a gift for my mother. But what should I have bought for someone so pragmatic like my dad, who's content with golf shirts and his old, wired earbuds? I purchased an *Economist* subscription, which came with a student discount.

I certainly understand my dad less than I thought I did. He appreciated the gift, but the weekly print edition is a firehose of journalism he needed more time to read. My dad is much more worldly and educated, but with the same underlying yet less potent pensiveness as his father. In contrast to his and his father's relationship, ours is still one of stewardship, since I have thankfully not been called to serve him in retirement yet.

I come around believing almost everything he says to me. Initially a hotel manager by trade, who studied at SAIT, a technical institute in Calgary, and UNLV, he worked for some time managing several hotel restaurants in Mexico before thirty-five percent inflation from 1995 and 1996 sent him back to Calgary for an MBA. His work ethic and pragmatism also allowed him to traverse into the banking sector in Alberta's regional capital markets.

He is very idiosyncratic. My dad would never buy a black or white car because the grime is more evident. He prefers doing the yard work on the weekends for good exercise and lamented over losing the

BlackBerry keypad years after switching to an iPhone. Sometimes, my mother says, "He's so practical that he's impractical."

Preparing the bag for my return flight to Kingston has felt like a fire sale during my past visits. I typically pack my bags with my family's home luxuries until I'm sure the bag clears for carry-on. Although most recently returning from the reading week, I could only claim Benjamin Graham's *Intelligent Investor* and my still-rigid black dress shoes, leaving plenty of packing space. This space I can't use is space I'll no longer have.

"Wear the black ones three to four times a week," my father told me. "The brown ones—the brown ones? Everyone will notice you're wearing the brown ones!"

"Yeah, makes sense," I say.

I'm increasingly venturing away from under his wing. The 787 Dreamliner, on my return from the reading week, seated many familiar faces from school, all returning to their other life after briefly taking a step back. After a forty-five-minute delay, the flight arrived at Pearson early. The east winds took an hour off the itinerary, a rude insistence that we all have a life to resume.

From the Marriott's second-storey PATH sky bridge, I fail to point out the building I'll spend my summer in, blocked by iron towers. You can't breathe in this city. Bay Street is occupied by consultants, lawyers, tech behemoths, and the Big Five Canadian Banks. Their presence was communicated by screaming letterboards that Saturday morning, and only a semester separated me from my experience of this metropolitan "metro, boulot, dodo" lifestyle. I'll learn to navigate Toronto's concrete landscape effectively and pack my lunch in anticipation of each day.

My experience auditing this summer will be unlike my dad's years of financing and hotel experience, and even more unlike my

grandfather's experience at his business. Furthermore, I'm joining the workforce at a record period of deskilling where AI and computers are permeating small businesses and turning skilled jobs into semi-skilled or unskilled jobs (LLP), and a bachelor's degree is no longer as differentiative or advantageous in the job market (Peacock, et al.).

I still ponder what my dad means about black shoes. I prefer the brown ones that have collected creases throughout many years. They match the colour of dirt from the city streets. They're low maintenance and mask the grime accumulated on them. The black shoes must be polished from the salt stains, mud, and water that misfortunes them. Although, the grit that will be demanded of me is akin to the pack of shoe shiners that will keep my shoes presentable this summer.

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Coastal Colours

HANNAH VEYSEY

THE SALTY seaside wind wisped across my lips as I set foot over the last step of the boardwalk and my feet buried themselves in the cool sand. Consortiums of little sand crabs ran up and down the shore following the evening tides while the sun was a burning ball of fire setting over the horizon. Strokes of tangerine, pink, and deep purple painted across the sky as I turned my head towards my mother. The beach stretched for miles, both left and right, as if you could wander the shore for an eternity. We had finally arrived in the Outer Banks.

In the summer of 2018, my mother, in search of beach and sun, packed me, my brothers, and our swimsuits into the car and headed south for North Carolina. She drove for fourteen hours with me as her co-pilot and my two younger brothers as parrots in the backseat.

"Are we there yet?"

I could hear the static from the radio as the stations changed as we moved from city to city. We noted the unique scenery of each state, all with something new and wonderful to offer. The lush green of the Appalachian Mountains in Pennsylvania turned to bustling city streets in

Baltimore, Maryland, while the Eastern Redbud trees blossomed with pink and white flowers that swept across the Virginia highways.

Perhaps the most breathtaking view was the colossal bridges that sprawled over the ocean connecting Virginia Beach to the Outer Banks of North Carolina. My mother still looks back fondly on the drive and often retells one of her favourite memories from the trip as being the moment she first saw the sandbanks from the bridge. She described it as the feeling of driving over the ocean like we were on a steep roller coaster.

She had travelled across many causeways in the U.S., but never before anything like that. For her, it was like the notion of coming to a beautiful paradise surrounded by sand and water. That was the key: paradise.

Following her recent separation from my stepfather, I could see in her demeanour that she was physically and emotionally drained from the past couple of months. While she wouldn't say it at the time, upon reflection of our trip it occurred to me for the first time that this vacation was restorative for her. We all needed time to relax and enjoy the company of one another. That is what she really wanted. It was this little paradise found in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean that would allow the possibility for healing to begin.

All the arcane details of the island are what made it such a special place with so much to offer. One of the most spectacular features of the island was the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse. Standing at 198 feet tall, it is the tallest brick lighthouse in the United States and second in the world. The achievement and unique nature of the structure made it one of the many wondrous treasures the national seashore had for us to discover.

I made the long trudge up the spiralling staircase all the way to the top of the lighthouse until I reached the lookout deck. It was an astounding view. The strong gusts of wind blowing back my sundress

and hair were thrilling. One wrong move near the rickety railings and you would plummet into the jagged rocks below. It was a panoramic view that captured everything from the glistening seashores to the looming marshlands. It felt as if I could take the image from atop the lighthouse for myself and swallow it whole.

We had heard many stories from locals about the history and mystery of the lighthouse. Over the course of the past two centuries there were various accounts of the windowpanes and the Fresnel lens being reported missing, stowed away in attics and hiding spots by members of the community. Everyone wanted a piece for themselves. The lighthouse was, in a way, the pride of the island. The encroaching seashore and possibility for erosion meant the lighthouse had to be moved, which, of course, brought about great opposition.

During my reflection upon my vacation to the Outer Banks, I came across a fantastic journal piece that made a thoughtful statement about the nature of people's reactivity to the relocation of the lighthouse that went as follows: "The taking of the Hatteras Light is a powerful statement about our society's reluctance to accept change and loss, and our refusal to embrace the consequences of living in a world shaped by natural forces" (DeBlieu and Halminski 24). Reading that after my trip deeply resonated with me. Just as people had refused to accept change and loss with regard to the lighthouse, I had been hesitant to acknowledge the change and loss that had occurred within my family. This passage from an objective standpoint put my situation into perspective. I could no longer hold onto my compartmentalized anger.

How was I ever to move on and grow if I couldn't acknowledge and process my feelings?

After returning from the beach, my seven-year-old brother chose pizza as one of extravagant meals for an evening out in the Outer Banks. My mother decided that in order to immerse ourselves into the area that

we would walk to our destination. As we passed through the neighbourhood, I gazed at the wooden matchstick homes that lined the streets with vibrant blues, yellows, and pinks. Within a couple of blocks, we hit the only main road that connected all the small towns spread across the national seashore. There were no sidewalks along the main road, only shoulders of the road big enough for pedestrians and cyclists.

The sun cast shadows of spiderwebs spun into the hedges that lined the swales of large estates alongside the road. As our walk continued the air became thick, filled with flies and mosquitos. We held our breath so as not to ingest them. My mother chuckled in realization that no one else dared to walk along the roads in the evening for this very reason. We had done a great job of immersing ourselves.

One evening at sunset, we walked across the ridges atop the sandbanks and came across a herd of wild horses. My mother had read earlier during her research that there were designated areas where visitors could observe the Corolla wild horses along the shoreline of the Northern beaches.

"Look! Look!"

As I looked down, I caught a glimpse of the horses running by the sea's edge, their manes blowing in the wind as flecks of water caught in the sun's rays glimmered. My cheeks blushed as they disappeared into the distance.

The sleepy community provided the perfect space and time I, and especially my mother, needed to look introspectively at our thoughts and feelings towards our family's circumstances. There were so many wonderful things to see and do on the island that brought so much joy to my family, allowing for the tension and repressed despondency to be set free. While I hadn't realised it at the time, my vacation to the Outer Banks of North Carolina was the beginning to a restorative and healing process for myself, my brothers, and my mother, alike.

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Despite Everything

ALISON WALMSLEY

ON THOSE days when the authority melted away to reveal the person behind it, I decided I wanted to be a teacher. Mom asked for help every once in a while, moving boxes of books or sorting crayons. But for the most part, my brother and I doodled on whiteboards and played around with games on the computer. Hallways transformed into raceways from what was usually tolled highways where students paid their happiness to gain a sense of worth through worksheets and pop quizzes.

It was those days that I felt most at home, and the most at peace with myself. I was certain even then that I would end up in a classroom just like hers for the rest of my life. She tells me now that I used to teach my stuffed animals just for fun. I loved every part of the days my brother and I spent stapling shiny letters to bulletin boards and setting out unchewed pencils on desks.

From a young age, it had all been lain out for me. The decorating and poster-making drew me in, and the longer I spent settled on this version of my future, the more I wanted it. The last two generations of

my family have been largely composed of education workers. My grandfather had been a principal at almost every school in the Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board. My paternal grandmother had directed schools to call my mother when she was unavailable to supply teach.

In grade ten, students in Ontario are required to take a civics and careers class. It's a class meant to prepare us for life, yet we never talked about mortgages or taxes. The teacher made us research university programs and jobs. I knew exactly what the theme of my project would be. Until, of course, my teacher crushed all my hopes and dreams in an instant.

"There're too many teachers already. Pick something else."

I forced my face into a smile and settled on psychiatry, the more medical sister of psychology. I'd spend a couple years in postsecondary classes on mathematics, anatomy, and chemistry, then a few more battling my way through medical school—if I got in. Next would be a five-year-long residency and another big test or two (Kimber) and I'd be on my way!

Despite my willingness to put aside my despair, and my ineptitude in math and physics, there was only one thought on my mind.

I *hate* biology.

I have since come to find that a pandemic will rid a school of its teachers. So many called in sick, and so few wanted to replace them. Principals and secretaries sent out automated calls to everyone they had on file, desperately searching for someone to stand in for their staff. I had just arrived home from my first year of university, looking forward to a break after spending the previous weeks preparing for finals. Immediately upon arriving home, I was invited to my mom's school as

an emergency supply teacher. And I wasn't the only one. At one point, there were three teenaged teachers in the school, taking up the jobs qualified adults had refused.

I spent a few days a week supply teaching in the last two months of the elementary school year. Multiple times, I was called in to replace an Educational Assistant, but was shifted around to fill in for a homeroom teacher or even to switch roles every hour. I would be tugged in every direction, from one end of the school to the other, standing in for multiple people in a single day. While I had some experience teaching before (I'd done co-op classes in high school, and I'd completed my first year of practicum at a local Montessori school that winter), it was different. I wasn't just a helper in the classroom.

No. These students were my responsibility.

I became paranoid at times, worried that I'd break some rule or, worse, lose a kid. When we were outside, I found myself counting them over and over, questioning my decisions to allow students inside on their own. What kind of person asks themselves if they should let a child answer the call of nature? Many times, I found myself doubting whether teaching was really the right lifestyle for me.

My first two weeks or so were spent filling in for a teacher whose child was urgently admitted to SickKids hospital. People told me I was brave for going into such a challenging profession at such a young age, but that class was relatively well-behaved. I would go home and, around the dinner table, I'd tell my family just how well the day went.

"They were so wonderful today! I feel like I got through to Oliver."

My mom would smile and ask for more. I would go on to recount every detail I could remember.

"Does everyone understand? It's like a paint by number—at the top you have a key for what colour to shade in each block." I held up the page again and, seeing a few nods, I began handing it out.

The moment the page hit his desk, Oliver was asking yet again.

"Can I play with my Lego?"

I didn't want to say no too many times, especially to this kid.

"Here, why don't we use your Lego to do your math? Use the pieces to show your adding, and then you can put them together as you do your work. Why don't we do the first few together?"

I felt myself glowing. I'd made some progress with a student known to be violent and disruptive, and it had taken just a single day. Surely my mom had been overreacting when she told me they'd eat me alive. The gig had been amazing so far.

The self-doubt really kicked in later when I spent a few days in Mrs B's room. Students would misbehave constantly, call each other names, swear at each other. Grade twos! Swearing! It was hard to imagine a home where that was permitted, especially at that age. I'd heard so many stories from my parents and grandparents about how students used to be: compliant, motivated, studious. Perhaps they were even more well-behaved when their regular teacher was away. Today, though, they knew they could get away with more. I was so grateful for the lunch bell. Getting in the car by the end was a relief.

But I made it through those rough days and, despite everything, I still want to teach. I still boil over with excitement at the thought of my own classroom. The positive experiences I've had outweigh any annoying, frustrating, or downright scary moments that I endured. I'm too attached to the idea of helping people find their way to quit on the future I've planned out. And so, I reach towards tomorrow with the

excitement of a writer eavesdropping on gossip, allowing a story to write itself. I reach towards my future, ready for whatever comes at me.

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Life-Long Learner

ALEX WILSON

I STARE out the window of my second-grade classroom, watching the world pass by in front of me. The bustling chatter of nineteen other students clouds my thoughts. Chairs scratch against the floor as they stand up, indicating they have finished their work. The flurry of sounds around me feels like burr holes being drilled into my head, except instead of relieving pressure, they become a failed lobotomy. I am bound to my corner of shame because I cannot write down any of the many words refusing to leave my brain. They are locked down as firmly as I am supposed to be at this desk. The bell rings through the halls, signalling fifteen minutes of freedom, and the children scramble outside in a flurry of joyful cheers. I burry my shameful expression of disappointment. I know my imprisonment is far from over.

A few years later, I sit across from a curly-haired woman who asks me to complete difficult, tedious tasks. I struggle to understand how building strange shapes with blocks and completing timed math sheets will help her understand my brain. Burning tears well in my eyes, that

all-familiar painful lump in the throat rising as she diagnoses me with a learning disability.

"I don't look at this assessment as a negative thing, sweetie. Your disability also means you are gifted in many other areas."

Although her words are kind, I hate every one of them. As far as I am concerned, I am now verifiably stupid.

By the time I could talk, my Nana and I would play school upstairs in my room for hours. I always felt safe and unjudged inside the bubblegum pink walls of my bedroom, as she and I taught my dolls how to read. While we made work sheets and sang during circle time, she shared gripping stories about how she used to help kids as a special-education teacher. I knew from that moment on that I wanted to inspire others like she had.

The first time I played school with my sister, I taught her about density and why objects may sink or float in water. I watched her eyes shine as the rock sunk and the feather floated in our makeshift Tupperware bath. She made a poster and presented her new knowledge to our parents. The pride gleaming in her eyes reflected my own.

Many of my childhood memories consist of sitting at the kitchen table with my little sister, teaching her about my latest interest. Now we laugh and reminisce about the past and how "Miss Wilson" tended to be very bossy. Being young and relucent to do extra school on the weekends, she would often complain about the lessons I made for her. I wonder if I actually helped her or if it was a useless activity borne from my overactive imagination. Nonetheless, my favourite part of every week is when she calls to tell me about how school is going and ask for my advice about how to better advocate for herself. I probably took my role as her teacher too seriously, but I was determined for her not to have to go through the same challenges I had.

“Can I go downstairs for my test now?” I mumble to my grade-eight math teacher.

Seeing my discomfort, she dismisses me with a much-appreciated discreet wave of her hand. Head bowed, I shuffle away unnoticed. Banished far away again for being different. I envy the students who can sit still in their chairs and finish the test within the given time. Although it still feels like a prison, I find myself feeling grateful for the distraction-reduced, small room I am given for the test. Without it, I know that I will anxiously watch the clock as the seconds ominously tick away as few words make their way from my brain to the pencil. Maybe I should have been lobotomized.

As a seemingly accomplished grade eleven, I excitedly sit down with my first peer tutee. She timidly opens her homework, stares blankly at the page, and then back at me for guidance. I recognize the same shame in her eyes that I wore for years. I give her a hopefully reassuring smile and show her my favourite essay outline template. I let her talk passionately about the topic while I rapidly type and, soon enough, we have made progress on a seemingly impossible task. This time she smiles back at me and some of the same has melted away.

My Dad scoffs yet again when I tell my family at the dinner table that night that I have officially decided to go to Queen’s University for Concurrent Education. I look down at my untouched plate so that I don’t have to meet his gaze, knowing that just the day before one of my teachers warned me about choosing this path.

“You know you won’t make any money in that profession,” he reminds me for what feels like the one hundredth time in my life.

Everyone in my life seems to have an opinion about my career choice, and none of them are positive. My sister comes to my rescue, always grounding me in times of doubt. She tells us how she asked to write her first test in the resource room today, just like I taught her.

It's kind of ironic when you think about it. The kid who struggled through school wanting to spend the rest of her life in one.

I desperately try to pay attention in the overstimulating lecture hall as the professor drones on about essay structure. I am transported back to being seven years old with a blank page in front of me. He talks too quickly for me to take notes, so I shamefully give up. I shouldn't let my thoughts wander, but I can't help it. I need a reminder about why I am forcing myself to sit in this loud, sweaty room, continuing to hate my brain and this system that wasn't made for people like me. I wonder if I have let my younger self down, feeling like little has changed. I think of her. And my sister. Of the students with glazed-over eyes full of shame.

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