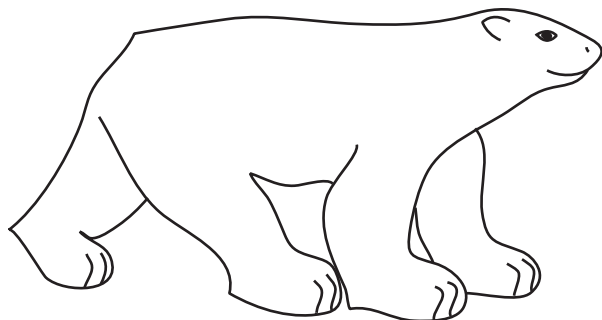


THE SHORT STORIES



FIRST-PRIZE WINNER

Roadkill

He walked alone today, wanting to be away from the crowd in the midday heat. The waving grass of the prairie was broken only by the long line of rubble. Instinctively, he turned away from its linearity, but not before his eyes caught sight of the irregular shape jutting out above the brush.

Of course, he knew already what it was, but he'd never seen one up close—it was strictly forbidden to approach such a thing. After a moment of indecision and a glance back to check he wasn't being followed, he moved on; legs parting the longer grass growing closer to the scar that cut through the land.

Senses alert, sniffing the air, he approached carefully, ready to back off if he sensed danger. His fear of poison being outweighed by the grip of curiosity that took hold of him, urging him forward.

Gradually, the bulky object began to take shape. Mounted, as it was, atop the broken rocks, it now stood above him and he had to raise his head to see it better. He stopped to take in the strangeness of the carcass before him. It was much larger than even himself and he could not begin to imagine the creature that could leave such remains after its death. What flesh and spirit would be added to this frame? Surely, its strange skeleton belied an iron ferocity and aggression unknown to him.

And yet, the smell of carrion did not accompany this open grave. He scanned the ground with care as he climbed the rough bank, aware of the foul blood that these creatures exuded. A metallic scent filled his nostrils, but any danger had long since left this place.

Finally, he stood in front of the behemoth. His head lowered, his eyes averted, he dared not look into its face. He could feel the weight of a brooding presence, forcing him into submission; sparking within him the flame of a primal urge to meet an opponent head-on.

Instinct taking over, he dared to look up. When he did, the vacancy of the hollowed eye sockets took his breath away. The huge mouth was open, revealing a final death scream and the twisted innards within. Even in death, he staggered at the awesome strength of the beast.

His mind struggled to accept the reality of just one such animal, but to think that there had once been countless such beings inhabiting the plains and beyond was incomprehensible. Their speed and accompanying roar belonged only in legends. Staring, transfixed, at the gaping holes that revealed the strange bones of the creature, his mind was suddenly filled with a vision. It came from deep within him, from a dim shared memory—seeped through generations. Now, it glowed with brightness and clarity.

Through the eyes of his ancestors he could see it alive—vibrant and fast, crossing the prairies in the sunlight, its skin glinting as it rushed along the smooth surface at an unimaginable pace. It seemed to glide with ease and he was filled with awe at its beauty. This surely had been a rare and wondrous miracle of nature.

And here it lay, open to the elements. An unfitting end for a magnificent beast. His heart felt a sadness that one such as this was no more. Surely the world had known greatness under the rule of such power and must be diminished by its loss. Here was a monument to a mighty past.

Paying his final respects to the silent dead, he looked out across the never-ending sea of grass and infinite blue sky. He felt the Earth's strength and breathed deeply, glad to be alive.

He looked back to where he had come from; the huge darkness covering the plains, the

countless crowd. They would soon be moving on; a thundering roar, leaving its own trail across the country. They remained and they endured. The power of nature stirred within him and he felt blood surging through his body. He strode down from the broken road and returned to the herd.

by Kate Powell

Fort Resolution, Northwest Territories



SECOND-PRIZE WINNER

Ladybug, Ladybug

I am alone in the playground of the old elementary school. Tonight is a calm salmon-red sky rimmed by black hills. The smell of smoke is finally dying down. I come down to the swing set after dark when it's empty and quiet. In a once-white nightgown now old and frayed, I push my feet up, then plummet down, over and over, sparking a sweet remembrance of efficacy and gravity, of childhood and simplicity.

Like when I was ten and tied my bed sheets into a rope and slid down from my bedroom balcony. Adults were always asking me if I'd done that, so finally I did. That night I ran through the empty streets to the park where I played on the swings for a lonely time protected by the fresh scent of my new white nightgown. Here I am again, alone on the swings in the dark, fifty years later.

No one knows how long we will be here in this makeshift evacuation centre. We don't know the extent of the devastation after the fires. Things are upside down and those who used to be incarcerated are now at large.

Thousands like us are locked up all over. Louise and Penny had a squabble this morning about a sliver of soap. Loud impatient voices often ring through the halls feeding the fear that pervades this concrete bunker full of total strangers. Mental exhaustion is a plague fuelled by the non-stop rumour mill and proof that hope has not been abandoned.

The surveillance system consists of monitors that sit blinking at one another and Rent-a-Cops that stand around smoking confiscated pot. Everyone is just waiting for news. Sporadic cell-phone connections keep alive the belief that families will be magically reconnected soon and that things aren't as bad out there as we imagine.

Nobody knows what is going on, but there is endless speculation.

We tell our stories day and night. Susan and I know this keeps us connected—to our old selves, to one another, and beyond. We list our lucky breaks and our heartbreaks. We make bonfires and sit around listening to one another, an ersatz but superior TV. Don reminds us the human need for stories and for light is inextinguishable.

I lived alone before this, like millions of others, perched in an empty nest somewhere in space and time. We were blogging and vlogging all over the globe, staying in touch with our tribe. We each share the moment, usually online, that changed our life. We joined groups fighting for a cause that mattered to us. Even if the causes were lost, the possibility of making a difference was pivotal. TV lost its hold and news came to us through a myriad of digital shots and texts. Flim-flammery in high places was revealed. Melanie recalls how heartened she felt when the truth started to get out and "people power" emerged. Just now, George and Peter are engrossed in another lengthy analysis of the end of our unsustainable system. Everyone had a different experience, but so much was the same.

When the fires began, we were rounded up "for our safety" and confined, but now we think we've been abandoned by governments who don't or can't care. We see this place as a prison or a sanctuary . . . at least a roof over our heads and three squares a day. In fact, some meals are differently coloured gelatinized squares making it hard not to eat dessert first inadvertently.

It turns out now we have time for meditation and reading. Freedom from the inanities of jobs and shopping is welcome. Yesterday, Ian gave me a Buddhist text, *The Wisdom of No*

Escape. This morning, Sally is thrilled to see us rediscovering our curiosity! Any insect, bird, or animal that survived is championed and cherished, then named and fed. Fruit flies as pets!

Most of us have lived in groups before, if not at a summer camp or a refugee centre, at least in an airport closed down by volcanic ash for days. It can happen that people mostly get along under duress and are surprisingly well behaved. The closeness and immediacy impel honesty and empathy.

Tonight Joanne got CBC radio. It gives us hope. Worrying is praying for what you don't want. Two days ago, I saw a bird fly by. Not a flock, but something alive. This evening I saw an exquisite red ladybug trundling along the windowsill, a tiny beacon in the dusk.

by Molly Bell

Salmon Arm, British Columbia



THIRD-PRIZE WINNER

Shirts

Jeffrey is the perfect drinking companion. He never says much, but he listens. When it's his turn to buy, he does. We both work for catering outfits and work the big social to-do's. So he knows what's what.

"Those shirts! They really get to me. Eight-hundred bucks apiece and Ivan Kozloff buys them by the dozen. Anyway, that's what Marcel says. You know Marcel, don't you?"

"I've met him."

"Marcel says Kozloff calls him 'my man.' That really burns Marcel. He says he'd like to tell the old lush to stick his job and find someone else to work for him. But a minute later he says he probably won't. Kozloff pays too well.

"But those shirts! He gets them in Montréal, which makes no—never mind. Planes fly in and out of Montréal every day. But they stick in my craw. What Marcel says he pays for them. And what Marcel says Kozloff pays him. There's no justice, is there?"

Jeffrey caught the barkeep's eye and nodded towards our glasses.

"Kozloff's cars, and that big place of his, and the parties and the booze and all that. And those trips Marcel told me about. I never pay any attention to that. If you have the money spend it any way you want. Otherwise what's the use of it?"

"I don't know why, but it always gets to me when Marcel talks about those shirts. For what they cost you'd think they were made from the skins of baby chicks still in the shell. You ever seen him? Ivan Kozloff and his eight-hundred-dollar shirts?"

Jeffrey nodded.

"So what's that with his shirts? Who's he trying to attract with those wattles lapping over his collar? Him pushing seventy and looking eighty.

"I'll tell you who. Those who get all dreamy-eyed about his money, that's who. And there's a pile of it, don't think there isn't. Marcel told me. He said one time he caught a glimpse of one of his accounts with the Royal Bank. He never told me exactly how much. 'Bunch of numbers with a lot of zeroes at the end,' is how he put it.

"Lisa Hayes was one who had an eye on those accounts, did you know?"

Jeffrey shook his head.

"Funny, I thought you would. I was passing out drinks at that fundraiser Judge Hayes had. You were working that night too."

Jeffrey nodded.

"Ivan Kozloff and all the rest of the big mucky-mucks staggering around drinking up the judge's scotch. And Judge Hayes's daughter, Lisa. You didn't see her pushing up against old Kozloff? All those big wigs and wannabes eyeing one another trying to figure out how little they'd have to throw in for the new surgical wing. The judge all bleary-eyed and blinking, just pouring the drinks down, watching his daughter rubbing up against old Kozloff, pushing it at him, and old Ivan all red-faced and wrinkled, the skin on his neck hanging down over his collar like a kid's droopy sock.

"Maybe you didn't pay any attention to that but I did. Lisa rubbing up against the fifty years difference Kozloff had on her. And on her face you could see all she's thinking of was dollar signs and numbers and strings of zeroes. And what a looker! And what a God-awful sight that was.

"—There are other looks she had. That's something I know for sure.

“—And it might even have happened. Old Kozloff and her. Except for the matter of that one little brain tumour. Took her out. Just like that. She was too far gone to operate.

“Marcel said the invitations were all ready to be sent out. I don’t know about that. I do know Kozloff sticks to that hunting lodge he has out by Kannawaki Falls. Never leaves the place. Marcel says he’s gone all strange, not getting his hair cut and not cutting his fingernails like that crackpot billionaire Howard Hughes did down in the States. Marcel says he keeps ordering those shirts out of Montréal. Boxes of them keep coming. He gets Marcel to stack them up in a back bedroom. Too bad. He doesn’t have a living soul. The lawyers will have a field day.

“But I wouldn’t mind getting my hooks on some of those shirts. Yes siree Bob, I wouldn’t mind. Have another?”

by Richard Toth

Bathurst, New Brunswick



HONOURABLE MENTION

Destiny Café

Eighteen-year-old Howie Masterton sat in the red vinyl booth of the Destiny Café, watching the rain relentlessly pound the awnings, compounding the dreariness of his life and the regretful situation he was mired in. Howie had made his own introductions to the faces in this new country, gravitating to street corners, poolrooms, seedy bars, and cafés. Soon he blended in with the street scene, became part of the landscape.

In a city of tough guys, there were pretenders and contenders. Howie wanted to be the latter. At times it was akin to predators on the Serengeti passing one another, sizing up the herds, letting them know who was, or wanted to be, on the top of the food chain. Hard looks and clenched fists were the order of the day. A brave new world.

Cutter set down a plate of fries and gravy, his tattooed forearms a riot of black ink.

“What’s with the cherry on the top, mon?” asked Howie.

“Fanciest meal you gonna get for a long time, island boy.”

“Think so?” Howie frowned and flicked the cherry off the gravy. It bounced against the sugar container and rolled off the table.

Cutter raised his brow in a knowing gesture and swept the ten-dollar bill from the table. “Thanks for the tip, island boy.”

“Hey!”

Cutter ignored the protest and limped away, his bum leg a memento of six years in Millhaven Pen for manslaughter.

Howie picked at his fries thinking about the Crandall brothers, the harbingers of his misfortune. Hooking up with those white boys for one night had been a nightmare. Jimmy and Timmy Crandall were dark clouds who rained all over him. Not a brain between them, constantly talking about how much iron they could pump. The pair reeked of marijuana. They were bold manipulators, physically intimidating.

Three nights ago they forced Howie into being a wheelman for a botched break and enter at a farm outside of town. Sweat filled the vehicle as Howie drove a car they said was stolen. Howie parked along the shoulder of a road and the brothers left the vehicle. Ten minutes later two rounds were fired in the dark, sounding like explosions. Timmy dove into the vehicle, his shirt splattered with blood. Howie hit the gas so hard his foot hurt.

Jimmy never came back. No more brother act. And Timmy wasn’t talking. Jimmy’s bony face and bloodshot eyes haunted Howie’s every waking moment.

Howie’s thoughts ran in circles from his blissful boyhood days to how he wished he should never have turned that ignition key. Now it was too late. Running and hiding for three days brought him to the dead end in the Destiny.

“Hey, Mr. Cutter. You think I am so stupid, waiting for them here?”

Cutter looked up from wiping the counter. “If you’re lucky they’ll send you back to your island, mon,” he replied, mocking the island patois.

“And if I am not lucky?”

Outside, three police cars braked in a screeching halt to the curb.

“Take a look, island boy, you’re about to find out.”

The bell jingled above the door.

Howie flinched, startled.

A street person entered and glanced around warily, dripping onto the floor.

“Haul your filthy ass outta here!” yelled Cutter, whipping a saucer at the man.

The saucer flew across the room, smashing the café window in a horrendous crash.

The cops went for their side arms, ducking behind their vehicles. A stream of curses spilled from Cutter.

Howie shot to his feet, his arms lifting to shield himself from the raining glass.

Gunfire roared from the curb.

Howie's body jerked like a puppet and dropped back into the booth. He gasped in short, rapid breaths staring at the plate of fries.

Cutter peeked out from behind the cash register. "Guess you should have had that cherry, Howie." He slipped the ten dollars into his pocket.

by Edward Yatscoff
Beaumont, Alberta



HONOURABLE MENTION

So What?

“Just don’t say fuck.”

“I might.”

He takes his right hand off the steering wheel and jerks his head to face me with his familiar look of alarm bristling like animal whiskers, the controller losing control. I watch his face roll and repeat between those emotions; with his anemic smile he assumes I am making a joke. *An elliptical loop*, I thought bizarrely; *he’s got an elliptical face*.

I contemplate my announcement through the entire drive, the irritated Friday traffic offers opportunities for honking and profanities, a skill of his. In backed-up traffic our car hardly moving, I check out the right-hand lane, inventing stories about the van full of kids wiggling in car seats, the mother turning back shouting, or about a woman driving alone with a cell phone to her ear. What did she say to no one listening? “Hey,” I wanted to bang on her window, “how’s it feel for you?”

Truck drivers, their trucks’ silver canisters hacking diesel smoke, have mirrors as big as my dresser’s, idle, and I lean over to look up. We’re both going somewhere but they have mirrors.

He isn’t talking, just listening to re-run radio news. Mine is just breaking. Fiddling with the dial he finds old tunes, the break-your-hearts, and sings along. “Takes me back,” he says. I give him a flaccid smile, but not my lyrics.

On the ferry we find the tedious BC gift shop filled with faux culture souvenirs, and expensive chocolate which I bought. He disappears to those plastic seats up front, away from the kiddies’ area, to read his science fiction. When I join him I share my chocolate with some resentment. Studying the side of his face, meticulously shaved, I wonder, *If I say this, what are the possibilities?* Or, *If I say that, would there be anger, muffled surprise?* I invent opening lines.

Driving down the street now, he points out the houses: “That poet lived here, . . . my uncle lived there.” I fake interest. Now he repeats, “Just don’t say fuck in front of her, okay?”

The white dotted lines on the road perforate my remaining time. All of my possible scenarios evaporate.

“I think I’m pregnant.” It may have been one word. I watch him, I am aware of expensive houses on my right, of dust pulsed by the air-conditioning outlets.

“So what?”

So what? “So what?” is a comment suitable for “those colours don’t match”, or “there’s a sale on potatoes”, or “my toe nails rip my socks”, but as an answer to “I might be pregnant” it wasn’t on my list of plausible replies.

He has the minimal grace to say it quietly, to look at me, my eyes, for seconds. He has both hands on the steering wheel.

“So, if you are pregnant, I’ll marry you. I wanted to anyway.”

I blink at him like the yellow warning lights at old intersections. “That’s all you think is ‘So what?’” I look out the window, back at him, and out again. “So what?” The words are ping-pong around the car; he’s not catching my point, maybe he is ducking. “So, I might be pregnant and you’ve already got a wedding planned?”

He looks at me like I’ve forgotten my agenda book. “Well, yes, we would need to, wouldn’t we?”

“Did I miss something here? We have sex for a month, decide to meet your mother, and now you are marrying me? Do I have a say in this subject? Where’s the bended knee, the ring?” I watch the “So what?” as it keeps ping-pong. “If I’m not pregnant, what then? That’s it?”

He wrenches into a long driveway of columnar cedars. I’ve read that in a medical state of shock the patient may not recognize people or place. Perhaps he’d rear-ended someone and I missed the impact, just shifted into shock. Maybe I’m only imagining that he’s less perturbed

by the possibility of pregnancy and even marriage than by profanity in her living room. He put his hand on the gear shift preparing to stop. He has such a crook in his elbows and knees, I envision a news headline, *Arachnid Drives Small Car*.

“Yes, so what. I want to marry you.”

We park in her driveway. She’s there, my future mother-in-law: the classic blue-rinse, ivory blouse, dark-skirted woman.

I didn’t say fuck, though I should have. I wasn’t pregnant but I married him anyway, and I shouldn’t have. Now I say fuck wherever I want. It wards off demons.

by Karen Bissenden

Salmon Arm, British Columbia



HONOURABLE MENTION

Family Day

“It’s cold. This doesn’t qualify as quality family time, Dad.”

My dad, at sixty-seven years old, is standing on a thick branch high above me and doesn’t hear me. Maybe he chooses to ignore me.

I’m not complaining without reason though. It is cold; it’s mid-February, and I’m standing outside holding a ladder while my father cuts branches off the maple in our yard. Not that holding the ladder is doing much right now as he’s stepped off its metal ledge and has one scuffed work boot planted firmly on a thick branch. I pray silently that the old tree is still healthy. His other foot waves freely in the air, a pendulum of balance for the saw teeth tearing through the frozen wood.

He is fearless.

He’s always been this way. At least in my memory he has. He’ll scramble up a ladder onto a two-storey roof, hang off a ledge, and stretch out his long sinewy arms to reach that far spot that needs paint. He’ll hop over fences, he’ll hunker down on the pavement to change the oil in his car, or he’ll race off after his granddaughter with a boundless energy I sometimes envy. Nearly forty years old when I was born, he’s always seemed younger than men half his age. The only problem is that his idea of an entertaining afternoon is standing out in the cold, chopping down trees. I have stood here before.

“Isn’t this a task for a warmer day?” I ask.

“Nope.”

The branch he has been sawing at gives a creaking sigh and snaps. I watch as it tumbles downward, twigs catching in the thin limbs below. It hangs, suspended in its fall, for a few minutes and my father bounces a little on his branch.

“Dad!”

The hanging branch cracks loose and falls with a solid thud on the snow-covered ground below, narrowly missing our neighbour’s picket fence. Dad looks down at me from his perch.

“That didn’t hit you, did it?”

“Are you coming down now?” I ask, exasperated. He is always like this.

“Yup. Gotta cut some more on the other side. Altogether too many branches on this tree.” He is halfway down as he answers and he hands me the rusting hacksaw. I move out of the way, still holding the ladder as he hops down to the ground. We clear some of the debris first, chopping the heavy wood into manageable bits and piling it by the garage as if we were stocking up for a winter fire.

The cold has seeped through my jeans and is lying like a damp towel over my skin. I dance a few steps to warm up, my thick purple work boots clomping heavily on the ground and grinding the twigs to fine pulp beneath them. I’m considered a good dancer, but today it doesn’t show; I trip over the remaining brush and wheel erratically before righting myself. I hope the neighbours aren’t looking out the window.

“Stop dancing and come help me.”

Dad is ready again. The ladder drops against the tree trunk and he jiggles its sides so the metal feet sink into the spongy earth. Though I’m beginning to lose the feeling in my gloved fingers, the day is unseasonably warm for February 15th and the ground is only covered with a thin film of snow. Dad is up the ladder again and I contemplate the clumps of soil left behind by his boots on the rungs. Some have migrated to my gloves and more than likely my face. Wisps of tangled auburn hair are escaping from my hoodie and draping my eyes.

Above me, Dad has chosen his branch. *Zzzt, zzzt, zzzt* goes the saw again. Sawdust snows down on me. I scrunch my eyes closed to keep the tiny particles out of them. *Zzzt, zzzt, zzzt, crack, thunk*. Another branch falls and the process begins again.

“There’s sawdust in my hair!”

“Better than a limb hitting your head!”

This is how I'm spending the holiday. This is what twenty-eight, single, alone, unemployed, unwanted, the day after Valentine's Day feels like: cold, damp, dirty, salted with wood chips, and, oh yes, shoelace untied, holding a ladder for my father. Surprisingly, it feels pretty good, though I'd give my right eye for a hot chocolate. I can't see out of it anyway.

by Valerie MacDonald
Oakville, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

The Tiger Lily Butterfly

Some girls love horses. Other girls love puppies. My little sister loved puppies and horses, but above everything else, she loved butterflies. The summer she was five, she took every penny she owned to the corner store and bought a yellow butterfly net. Whenever Mother let her go play—and sometimes when Mother didn't—Sarah would run into the hay fields, chasing the little blue, yellow, and white butterflies that flitted around clover, timothy, and alfalfa. Father never scolded her for trampling the crops; her little feet hardly broke a leaf. Day after day, she was in the hay fields, queen over her winged subjects.

I joined her one afternoon after my chores.

"You have to be careful when you hold them, or you rub the powder off their wings that makes them fly," she told me. "See? Like this." She loosely cupped a tiny blue butterfly in her small, grimy hands. I watched the butterfly flutter around its cage. I reached out and Sarah let the little blue insect fly into my cupped hands. I smiled as its tiny wings tickled my fingers. Tired from its pointless fight, the butterfly rested. Ever so slowly, I opened my hands. The butterfly perched on my finger, opening and closing its tiny wings. I saw the insect had black spots, like freckles, and a spider's web of veins on its sky blue wings. In a heartbeat, the butterfly was gone, lost among the thousand identical insects that soared and dove across the fields. I smiled at Sarah, and she gave me a toothy grin before dashing off. I watched her for a minute before I leaned back into the grass, the new summer sun hot on my face. I dozed off.

June stretched into July and the hay was cut and baled. The flocks of butterflies vanished, exchanged for horseflies and mosquitoes. The days grew long and hot, lending me time to go fishing and swimming after chores. Our creek ran right through our pasture, and the cows had wallowed enough in places to create swimming holes. It was on the banks of this creek that one particular butterfly had made its home in the dogwood. It was almost as big as my hand, all black and yellow with blue and a little white.

When I mentioned it at the supper table, Mother called it a tiger swallowtail butterfly.

"Can I catch the tiger lily butterfly, Mother?" Sarah pleaded.

"Tiger swallowtail, silly," I ruffled her hair, making her shriek.

"Luke, don't do that to her," Mother chided. "After you help me bring in the laundry," she said to Sarah.

"I'll go fishing after chores and keep an eye on her," I volunteered.

There were still a few hours of daylight when Sarah went down to the creek with her yellow butterfly net to catch her tiger lily butterfly. Father and I did our chores in the barn, while Mother worked in the house. The sun sank low in the sky, and I almost grabbed my fishing pole to join Sarah by the creek when Father needed me to help him fix the fence. The sun was down when we trudged back into the house and washed up.

"Where's Sarah?" I asked as I walked into the kitchen.

"I thought you were fishing with her." Mother looked at me.

Father flushed. "I needed him to help me fix the fence at the road. I forgot. . . ."

"Dear God!" Mother pulled on her boots, seized a lantern, and rushed out the door, Father behind her.

I was sick. I ran up the stairs into my little sister's room and flung myself on her bed. Hugging all her dolls and bears tightly, I prayed she would return to me.

The dry wind rattled the brown leaves on the trees that surrounded the family plot. "God, please make butterflies in heaven for my little sister, Sarah," I whispered. I looked up at the August sun. At first I thought it was a leaf falling towards me, but in a heartbeat, I knew what it was. I held out my hand and the tiger lily butterfly landed in the palm of my hand. I saw the tear-shaped tails, one on each wing. Even her butterfly was crying for her.

Then the butterfly was gone, flying back from where it came. I watched. I could see it no more, even though the sun made the tears stream down my face.
I whispered, "Goodbye, my little butterfly."

by Taida Speck
North Bay, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Christmas Cheer

My name is Quinn, Bob Quinn, mini terrorist. I've had a lot of time to think since I retired from my medical practice, which entailed a lot of brain work. I really had the notion that I was a thinking kind of guy, until I retired, that is. I named my first year of retirement "The Year of Critical Thinking"; quite a different animal from the book-taught mind work I'd previously relied on.

So here I am on a snowy evening in mid-December thinking about climate change, pesticide use, the war in Afghanistan, politicians full of empty rhetoric they spoon feed to the public. I became exhausted just contemplating such overwhelming subjects. Sipping on a scalding cup of tea, I thought about a smaller matter: outdoor Christmas lights. A glimmer of an idea started to grow. I concentrated on Christmas lights—sacrosanct Christmas lights as I soon discovered.

I like Christmas lights, don't get me wrong. They light up snowy winter nights that sometimes need a bit of cheerful illumination. When the children were small, we would all pick favourites. Mine were those on low shrubs covered with mounds of snow. The muffled lights had a magical quality. When critical thinking kicks in, and emotional thinking butts out, however, what's left is electrical wastage, and light pollution. The cost of producing beauty has to be weighed carefully.

I decided that the lights would be my focus. First I surveyed the public, appealing to their environmental consciences. That was a complete failure. No one I talked to would even begin to consider giving up their precious lights. Next I thought of approaching the local council, suggesting a by-law limiting the lights to a week before and a week after Christmas. Again I was strongly discouraged.

Plan C took me down the municipal terrorist route. Apparently I was on my own. The job I originally had in mind was too big for one person, so I had to modify the plan.

Silver Springs subdivision, that was the place. Not that there were any springs there anymore, silver or otherwise. All water sources had been filled in, or diverted through culverts to allow houses to be built on top. Large monied houses stood, each vying to outdo the other with fantastic and electricity-digesting creations. Yes, Silver Springs would be my target.

Christmas Eve came. I figured that the children would be in bed early, waiting for their annual nocturnal visitor. Hopefully moms and dads would be early to bed also. That afternoon I'd had a bit of a longer snooze than usual, just to keep me sharp later on. I put on a warm jacket as the temperature was holding at -10° C. I set off to walk the half mile to The Springs.

Exposed by the snow-muted streetlights, I went from house to house simply unplugging the lights from their outdoor sockets. The streets grew darker behind me with just the trusty overhead lights illuminating my way. I felt vulnerable as I moved on, sure that someone would disrupt my sabotage, but all was quiet, the street sleeping like its inhabitants, in preparation for Christmas Day.

When the last display had been darkened, I took a satisfied look at my handiwork, then headed home.

As I turned onto my street, two things came to my attention. One was a distinct smell of smoke. The other was the urgent sound of approaching sirens. *They've caught me*, I thought when I saw the police car parked in front of my house.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. The fire trucks roared up. The fire personnel jumped out and attached a hose to the hydrant at the corner of my property. I realized an officer was restraining a man over the hood of the cruiser. Then I glanced at my house and noticed smoke billowing from the basement windows. Flames were starting to crawl up the window frames, and sparks flew upwards, adding an orange glow to the watching faces.

I was nudged aside by a focused fireman. Again I looked at the prostrate man on the police cruiser. I recognized Jim Sanderson. I remembered how irate he'd been last week at my suggestion of a Christmas light ban. He twisted his head around and sneered up at me.

"And how do you like your very own Christmas lights, Mr. Quinn?" he whispered as he was encouraged into the back of the cruiser.

by Karen Beggs

Salmon Arm, British Columbia



HONOURABLE MENTION

Undecided

One lonely bug buzzes in circles around the curled fly tape. You'd think he'd notice the bodies of the other flies blackening the sticky surface, but I guess flies are dumb like that.

The fan is doing nothing in this heat. Even the open door is doing nothing but letting in clouds of dust that settle all over everything. No wonder my computer barely works. The hard drive has got enough dirt inside to fill a kindergarten sandbox.

A hesitant cough makes me turn my head.

"Excuse me?"

The lady isn't quite young; not quite old yet.

"I was wondering—has my husband been here? With anybody?"

He probably has. They float in and out like the clouds of dust, coming way out here to hide their . . . misbehaving.

"A lot of people come here, ma'am."

She looks embarrassed, then starts to dig around in her purse. It's funny how people forget the centre of their universe isn't the centre of everyone else's.

"Here's a picture."

She pulls a small portrait out of her wallet. I recognize his face. He's been here a lot with a woman, but not the woman he's with in this picture. Then again, I had figured it wasn't his wife he brought here; he was much too interested in her for them to be married. The picture she hands me includes two young kids. They're all smiling, looking picture-perfect.

I hate it when they show me the kids.

"His face does look familiar, ma'am, but I'm not sure whether he's come to my motel or not. I may have just seen him around town. I'm sorry I can't be of more assistance to you."

She slides the picture back into her wallet, looking none too sure if she should be relieved or not. I think she'd look younger if she didn't look so worried.

"Ma'am, I'm sure your husband wouldn't do what . . . what you think he's done."

She blushes. It's amazing what people think they're hiding.

"I'm sorry," she says, "I'm sure it's an unusual request."

I wish.

"No—no, ma'am. Happens to everybody. Everybody gets worried sometimes."

"Yes, yes—"

She looks down, seemingly hoping that there's an excuse to leave written somewhere on my cracked tiles. She looks up again. "Are you sure he hasn't been here?"

Her eyes are certainly young.

Here lies the rub. Every time. To tell. Not to tell. The truth is what you're supposed to say, I know, but I can't bear the thought of the pain it would give nice ladies like her. What a business I'm in. I should have set up my motel in town, not on the outskirts where these buggers like to run.

Her eyes are too pretty to have tears in them; not here where I can see.

"Like I said, ma'am, I can't be sure. Maybe you ought'a talk to him about it. Maybe it's just a misunderstanding." I don't know why I give them this second chance, these cheaters. I just want them to know the ladies are on to them, to give them a warning, a chance to change their ways before they ruin everything. I doubt it works, but I try my best.

"Yes, of course, thank you." She heads for the open door; purse, with the wallet and picture inside, clamped firmly under her arm.

"Ma'am?" She turns back. "I have a question for you, hypothetically speaking." She waits. "In the future, if I had a lady, like yourself, come in, and she asks me the same question, and I did know her husband was here, what should I tell her? Would you, really, want to know?"

She opens her mouth, about to give the automatic answer: a solid yes. But she stops, she frowns, she thinks. “I don’t know.”

She walks out the door, leaving me with four yes, three no, and seven—well, eight now—undecided responses. I guess I’ll have to wait for the next one to give me a clear answer.

I’m glad I’m not Catholic. The priest doing my confession would probably need a pack of smokes a day if he had to listen to the sins I do, not to mention the sins I see.

by *Eliane Drijber*

Fisherville, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Sway

It was the ticking of his heart that convinced him. Though his doctor disagreed, though his wife called him a raving lunatic, Elliott could tell. His heart was getting slower. He was on the downhill slope to death.

He pushed open the door to the sandwich shop to see Carl wrapping a croissant for a waiting customer, while bacon sizzled on a grill behind him. A couple of hungry patrons waited patiently for their lunch. Taking a seat nearby, he watched Carl take the next order. The years had not been kind. The sagging wrinkles under his friend's eyes made his bulbous nose appear larger, and his shoulders seemed to droop with discontent. Elliott plunked his guitar case on the counter, but Carl didn't even look in his direction.

"I'm working," he said, "and since it's barely 11:30 in the morning, I'll assume you should be too."

Smiling and patting the case he replied, "Tonight is our big gig."

Stopping mid-sandwich, Carl's head turned slowly to look at him. "How long do you plan on imagining you can actually resuscitate our ridiculous college rock star fantasy?"

Elliott leaned forward. An attractive young woman waiting for her sandwich gave him a strange look. "This is our chance!" He looked around as though he possessed a state secret. "Sway could be so much more than a garage band."

"You're delusional."

"No, for the first time in years, I'm seeing straight. I'm cashing in, taking a risk, gambling on the power of optimism," he said.

"Apparently you're not listening to yourself." Carl passed a BLT wrap over to the young woman, who hurried nervously out the door, leaving the shop empty. Carl sighed audibly. "We're fifty years old. We have jobs, families, mortgages, arthritis, high cholesterol . . . shall I continue?"

Elliott slapped the counter top, mustering all the conviction he could find, his heart racing faster. "What about dreams?"

Carl wiped the counter down with a rag. "Look, I don't mind jamming with you from time to time, but we've got to be realistic. This band audition is not a dream—it's a mid-life crisis."

Elliott sulked. Feeling stuffy, he unbuttoned his jacket and loosened his tie.

Dropping the rag in the sink, Carl began scraping the grill. "It's normal to feel this way. Go home, get some rest, spend some time with your wife, go to work tomorrow, and forget about the whole thing."

"I quit my job."

"You what?"

"I quit my job. Carl, I need a change. I need a challenge, something to aspire to, something to be passionate about—I need Sway!"

Carl muttered, rubbing his temples. "How could you quit your job?"

"I did it for this," he explained, picking up his guitar case, and shaking it in the air. At that moment, the door swung open, a small bell announcing a new customer.

There was pity in Carl's eyes. "You're my oldest friend, but I can't give you false hope anymore. Go home."

The sound of Elliott's beating heart seemed to echo through the room. "I didn't really need your help anyway," he mumbled, and walked out of the shop. He looked up and down the bustling street for several minutes. In one direction lay his past: a dead-end paper-pushing job; a routine existence with little excitement. In the other direction lay the seemingly unattainable future: fame, money, travel, *life*. He picked that direction.

He headed towards change. One step first, then another. With each step his pace increased. With each breath, a spark of conviction. From an undecided saunter he accelerated with a burst of vigorous speed, until his feet found him at the door of the club that bore the advertisement: "Old Timers' Garage Band Audition." He had to try.

But it was the ticking of his heart that alarmed him. Though his ambition saw the future clearly, though the way seemed sure before him, Elliott could tell. He sank slowly to the ground, hand clutching his chest, lungs gasping for precious air.

He was not on the downhill slope to death. He was at its door.

by Amanda Thomson

Magrath, Alberta



HONOURABLE MENTION

2746 Westhampton Green

It had been quite late when the new owner of 2746 moved into Westhampton Green. Mabel Stevenson saw the truck in the driveway and noted the time, as it had been well after curfew for such activities. She hadn't even realized the house had been sold; the Baxters had moved the previous week and hadn't mentioned any offers. Mabel knew everything that happened in the neighbourhood. No one should have been able to move into 2746 without her knowledge.

The next morning she rang Maxwell White to report her sighting and he had been as baffled as she. On her word he issued a gently worded citation and a small fine for breaking curfew, which he passed on to the welcoming committee. Darlene Rayburn dropped by 2746 with a homemade blueberry pie and the letter; she knocked on the front door and the patio door around back, but received no answer. Darlene left the pie and the letter on the front step, and went home. She was surprised to find her pie plate, spotlessly clean, on her doormat the next morning. Maxwell had opened his mailbox to find three crisp, ten-dollar bills paper-clipped to his letter, but no further correspondence.

Two months passed and no one at Westhampton Green had met the owner of 2746. He had only been spotted from a distance and under poor conditions. He never answered his door and never responded to invitations. The only sign of life was the steady stream of couriers that came to his door, carrying boxes in and carrying boxes out. Despite his apparent absence the house remained well maintained and no further council rules had been broken. The yard was neat and tidy, the walk kept clean, the gutters never overflowing. And yet no one had ever seen anyone cleaning the windows or mowing the lawn. It seemed as if the house were caring for itself.

In October, 2746 was on the agenda for the monthly homeowner's meeting. It was the most widely attended meeting since the recycling fiasco of 2008. Men and women crowded into Maxwell's rumpus room to discuss the mysterious man no one had ever met. Bettina Jenkins stood and told the room her husband thought he had seen children in his yard late in the night. When he had gone to investigate there was no sign of anyone. A shocked murmur rolled through the crowd as parents began to fear for their children's safety. Words like *predator* and *criminal* became louder and louder as the residents of Westhampton Green whipped themselves into a frenzy, like a shark scenting fresh kill. The pressure built until it could no longer be contained in four walls, and the mob poured onto the streets. Mothers and fathers gathered weapons in their eager hands—garden tools and sports equipment, crude clubs that made them feel safer. As one they gathered in the street outside 2746, a seething ball of righteous fury and distorted justice.

Soon the mob surrounded the workshop, their summons at the house unanswered. The fence lay trampled into the grass. Brad Lewis and Carl Morris kicked in the shop door and the crowd boiled inside. A man sat at the bench, middle-aged and rotund, his pate shiny and beard white as snow. He turned, wide-eyed and startled, in time to see the garish smile of a ceramic gnome as it struck him in the face. The man fell from his stool and tried to cover his head, but the mob scented blood. Rakes, shovels, golf clubs, and hockey sticks cut through the air, the sound of crude weapons striking flesh were only drowned out by the howls of rage. They beat and bludgeoned and smashed and stomped until the man was broken and limp on the floor. One by one they stopped, exhausted and drained as adrenaline left their bodies.

A woman began to sob. Someone flicked on the strip of fluorescent lights and for the first time they truly saw. The workshop was neat and tidy, the scent of varnish and sawdust in the air, and surrounding them were shelves upon shelves of handmade toys. Little wooden trains and soldiers, building blocks and tea sets, dollhouses and race cars filled the shop. A

glass bottle of milk lay shattered on the table, dripping steadily onto an overturned plate of cookie crumbs. As one the mob looked down at the broken, battered body on the floor.
And knew what they had done.

by Allison Edwards
Victoria, British Columbia



HONOURABLE MENTION

Sunset

Over time, the salt water has eaten away at the cement stairs leading down to the beach. I walk down them carefully. The staircase, brittle as old bones, falls away under my feet. A few scattered people trace the lip where the ocean meets the sand, looking out over the water. The stairs are like decaying teeth, opening up to the mouth of the shoreline. What remains is covered by strands of wet seaweed and discarded shells because the seawater, at its highest point, reaches there.

I make my way down to the water, and the tide is low, revealing silky sand. People and seabirds are digging for clams and other shell creatures. A middle-aged couple collect some, putting them in a bucket between them. Oysters, ridged with green algae are disguised in rock-coloured suits.

In the shallow waters, a blue heron stands on stilt legs, barely moving. Its feathers are the colour of spiralling smoke from a cigarette. The moon hangs pale, see-through, in the sky. I see dark is coming. The heron is using what remains of the light to spear the soft bellies of the white fish swimming around her patient legs. They swim and swirl, cutting through the water like knives. From shore, I see them glittering.

The air turns, growing colder. The water changes, blue to grey-green like a chameleon. Clouds collect, tightening in the sky like snagged fabric in a sewing machine. White-clawed crabs scuttle along the sand, some shredded by the seabirds. Across the boardwalk, in the park, blackbirds gather in the trees, their shrill cries a greeting for the moon.

I walk along the shore, brown shoes sinking into the mud. Metallic horseflies swarm in thick clouds of buzzing blackness, hoarding around the shapeless carcasses of jellyfish, black and purple, their bulbous forms like tumours removed from a lung or throat. The dead ones lie torn up on the rocks, leaving purplish gelatin stains on the sand for the scavenging flies.

Starfish, the colour of fresh bruises, creep in silence along the shallows. One star-shape propels itself under a rock as the moon comes into focus; the sky takes on a darker blue. The air becomes wet and crisp, and some people are getting ready to leave now that only the crescent of red-golden light remains on the horizon. From the park, crows have gathered and begin to cackle.

A withered man in crumpled clothing and a trucker's hat sits staring at the rolling, cloud-choked sky. His plaid shirt is missing a few buttons; his milk-brown slacks have a red stain down the leg. Earlier, he and his wife were selling artwork in the park, under the cool of the trees; she is packing things up now. Beside him sits a jar with dirty paint water, dark pink liquid circling inside. He smokes wine-dipped cigarettes. Absentminded, old hands with liver spots hold the paper bag and feed little birds bread crumbs and corn. It feels like it might rain.

There is a woman, farther along down the shore. A camera hangs from her neck like a crucifix, but maybe lighter. She pulls on a simple blue sweater, buttoning it. Her skirt is long with tiny buttercup flowers, brick-red middles. Green vines tangle around them, snaring themselves on purple diamonds. Her eyes look out over the water, taking an interest there. They pause on something I can't see on the horizon; the sun is gulped up—gone. The moon stands out, brilliant, and the crows are calmed. The rain starts its slow fall, like mist. I'm sitting, bare feet buried in the cool sand.

The woman is turning over rocks, watching insects and small creatures disperse, sand fleas jumping, disturbed. She snaps a picture of her findings. The rock makes a sluggish sound when she slides it back into place. She wipes her hands on the back of her skirt. All the creatures are of great interest to her. She strides along the shore past me, behind me. Her nail polish is chipped and red. Her long hair is dark and wavy, like the water just now. She stops by the crumbled stairs where the old man sits, smoking a cigarette, his second one. His wife

calls about collapsing the table. As the woman with the camera climbs the stairs, she slips stones in her pocket. Her heavy boots leave impressions on the wet sand.

As night falls, the sky darkens around these figures like liquid.

by Matthew Walsh

Toronto, Ontario



HONOURABLE MENTION

Silver-tipped Devil

She gave up her firstborn to marry him and I never could understand it. I always thought Harvey was a prick. I knew it when I met him; he smelled of stale cigarette smoke and last night's sex, sour whiskey and cheap cologne with the stench of garlic 'cause the bastard was Ukrainian. You can tell a lot about someone by their scent and I could smell the hate on Harvey too. He hated females—young and old and in-between; he hated us all.

I met Harvey when my oldest sister, Trina, brought him home to meet the family and tell Mom about putting Shelley, her firstborn, up for adoption. I didn't like him the minute I laid eyes on him and his silver-tipped cowboy boots.

Trina and Harvey were shackled up together in Calgary and he thought he was some kind of cowboy—always with the cowboy hats, boots, and western shirts with snaps instead of buttons down the front. The truth was Harvey was an alcoholic rig pig from the Alberta oil fields and wouldn't know what to do with a horse or a cow or a chicken. Trina met him at the Calgary Stampede and fell in love. Over warm beers and cow shit he'd convinced her he was prince charming.

But I know who Harvey is. I saw him last night when the whole house was asleep or passed out and he came home drunk from the bar with Trina. She was as drunk as he and they had been drinking whiskey; I could smell it from down the hall. I think that whiskey smell was probably what woke me; the scent of whiskey has always made me nervous.

By the time I'd come to stand in the doorway of the kitchen, in the shadows where I could see but not be seen, they were already arguing, throwing hateful obscenities and shoving each other around. Trina called him a dumb fucking Ukrainian and he wound up and clocked her, caught the corner of her jaw with his fist and set her on her ass. Then he laid those silver-tipped boots to her, kicked her in the shins and ribs and stomach before she could even curl up to protect her insides.

When he finally quit kicking her, she started to cry, loud, ugly, sobbing noises, snot and tears and blood dripping from her face. Then she crawled over to him, laid her broken leaking face on those boots and said, "I'm sorry, honey."

Harvey pulled her up by her hair, looked right in the mess of her face, and said, "I'm going to bed. Clean yourself up and clean my fucking boots too! You know I like those silver tips to shine." He let go of her hair and she kind of crumpled there at his feet, like some forgotten rag doll.

He took off his boots and went downstairs. I just stood in the shadows and watched Trina clean Harvey's silver-tipped boots. I was young then, five or six, and I didn't know about internal bleeding or I'd have been a lot more frightened for Trina than I was.

by Terri Bosner

Sechelt, British Columbia

