

# FIRST PRIZE

## The Other Shoe

Mike's flabby, forty-five-year-old frame slouched in an office chair was unsightly. His wife had recently left him, his dog had run away, and his sales department was being downsized. Mike didn't seem to care. He knew his days were numbered, but he had found a queer enjoyment in that knowledge. He was simply waiting until he was fired, for the other shoe to drop.

To amuse himself, he imagined "the other shoe" as a piece of space junk drifting out of orbit and plummeting to Earth. He had read an article—or heard a story on the radio, he couldn't remember which—that warned of a decommissioned satellite that would soon fall to Earth. The experts guessed it would be landing somewhere in the Canadian prairies. This grabbed Mike's attention, because he lived in Saskatchewan. He slouched down and looked out the office window at the vast expanse of blue sky. He imagined the other space flotsam that might be flying through the atmosphere. He imagined a Florsheim shoe reaching ridiculous speeds, rocketing towards his balding head as he walked to his car—perhaps today, or maybe the next; it made little difference to Mike. If your fate is to be brained by a wingtip meteor, you don't mind waiting.

Content in his morbid reverie, Mike hadn't noticed the phone ringing. It must have rung several times, as the voice on the other end sounded decidedly unimpressed—not that Mike cared. When one is resigned to an absurd demise, one becomes uncommonly accepting of life's smaller annoyances. The phone conversation didn't last long. This had more to do with Mike hanging the phone up than it did with the conversation's natural conclusion. The woman's voice on the phone had said, "You're fired." *Well*, Mike thought, *that is that*. He checked his watch. He actually felt relieved. He got up from the chair and slowly wandered out to the parking lot.

Mike watched the sky as he made his way to his car. Suddenly, he stumbled into a man named John Hillcrest. John was a man of similar age and build, and with the same, easily recognizable look of despair about him. After a cordial exchange of apologies, John asked Mike what he had been looking at. Mike told him about the satellite that could very well be a shoe that was trying to kill him. "It's up there right now taking aim at me. Could drop any second. You might not want to stand too close."

John laughed at this, even though he didn't really understand. He said, "There's probably a better chance of winning the lottery, I'd say."

Mike thought about this and said, "Knowing my luck, I'd keep a fair distance."

John was enjoying the distraction of the chance meeting. He had taken a longer lunch than normal that day to avoid going back to the office.

"Well, I best be getting going," Mike said and shook John's hand. "The name's Mike, nice to meet you."

"John, you, too." John thought a moment and asked, "Mike Wandermaker?"

"That's right," Mike said, looking surprised.

"I'm sorry, you were my one o'clock. My god, what time is it? I'm really sorry I kept you waiting."

Mike asked in turn, "Mr. Hillcrest?"

John said, "Yes, that's right. Well, this is awkward. . . . I don't want to waste any more of your time, so I might as well tell you straight off. . . . we've decided to sign with your competitor. I'm sorry, Mike."

"Well, John," Mike said smiling, "I'm afraid I have some rather bad news for you."

"What's that?" John asked, slightly irritated that Mike had any news for him, let alone bad news.

"You're fired, John."

"Excuse me?"

"While you kept me waiting in your office, Linda from head office phoned. She told me to tell you that you're fired. Well, actually, she thought I was you."

John's face was blank. He just stared vacantly at Mike.

"Anyway, look at it this way, at least you didn't get brained by a satellite today." Feeling somewhat content with himself for the first time in years, Mike turned and walked to his car with good posture. Mike felt a momentary reprieve from his own misfortunes. He almost wanted to laugh. The grunting sound behind him made him turn around in time to see John Hillcrest's unlaced and free-floating shoe flying at his face. It was a Florsheim.

*by Sean McCall*

Prince Albert, Saskatchewan

# SECOND PRIZE

## The Take-Down

“Hey, Jo-Jo, hold up!”

Gritting my teeth at the much hated nickname, I swivel slightly to the right to watch Carmine Morano approaching on his new Jazzy Elite motorized chair. Just seeing him lounging in that new wheelchair causes my blood pressure to rise, and I narrow my eyes as I watch him approach. I’m not jealous, just pissed off. Carmine acts as if he is the big boss while he’s in that stupid chair, showing off and talking about it nonstop since his deadbeat lawyer son delivered it last month. Daily, he can be seen driving through the common room at the Weeping Willow Mobster Retirement Home like a NASCAR first-timer—running over knitting projects, bumping into the nurses, and doing doughnuts in front of the television. It’s annoying and childish. The man is an eighty-two-year-old retired enforcer; where is his decorum?

“What’s the hurry, Jo-Jo?” Carmine asks as he pulls up alongside my older-model chair.

“It’s Joseph,” I say curtly.

“Jo-Jo makes you sound young and hip.”

“Well, I’m not young nor hip, and I prefer Joseph.”

Carmine shrugs. “Where you headed?” He pauses then adds snidely, “Jo-Jo.”

My jaw locks down so hard I think I may have chipped my dentures. “None of your damn business,” I hiss through my teeth.

“Jeez, what crawled up your ass?”

Ignoring him, I turn my chair back towards the light and will it to give me the walk signal so I can escape.

“I’m heading down to the senior centre for free cannoli. Maybe I’ll join the pinochle tournament and hit on the ladies.”

I snort. He ignores it.

“Want to come with me?”

“No,” I reply.

“Come on now. I’m sure you can keep up with my swanky new chair.”

“Of that I have no doubt, but the answer is still no,” I say and manoeuvre my chair slightly forward.

“Is this about Maria?” Carmine asks, coming back alongside me. “I swear I was just trying to be friendly. She used to fancy me back in the day.”

I twist in my seat to glare at the egotistical prick, wishing I still carried a gun. Instead, I reach over and jab a finger into his bony chest, ignoring the sharp pain in my shoulder as I do so.

“My wife thinks you are a senile, obnoxious bully. I just think you’re a *faccia da culo*. Don’t ever say her name again.” Lowering my arm, I flop back into the chair, breathing heavily from the exertion.

Carmine’s cheeks redden as his entire face contorts into a mask of rage. “I think you’re the ass!” he growls and pushes the accelerator lever, causing his wheelchair to jerk forward and slam into mine. He straightens and takes off into the intersection.

Reflexively, I hit the brake on my chair and lean to the right to prevent it from rolling off the small lip of the curb and possibly tipping over. Seething, I get the chair under control and chase after him with my heart hammering and my vision red.

“Carmine!” I call out when I come up from behind his fancy wheelchair.

He pops his head out from behind the headrest. “Bugger off, Jo-Jo!” He urges his chair faster and swerves in front of me, narrowly missing a small boy before knocking over a sandwich board outside the coffee shop.

“Watch it!” I bark at the escaping senior before tossing an apologetic smile to the boy’s mother as I roll past. I push my chair up to its maximum speed of six miles per hour and catch up to Carmine in the next crosswalk. Using my foot rests, I bump into the smaller back wheels of his ride, causing them to wobble. The chair veers away from the lowered sidewalk ramp and

into the higher curb. Carmine's chair slams into the concrete and stops moving forward. . . . He does not. The momentum flings his frail body from the chair onto the brick sidewalk—face first.

Giddy, I travel up the ramp, pivot the chair around in a victory circle, and before I've fully stopped, I jump up from the seat to loom over Carmine in joyous triumph. "Oh, how the mighty have fallen! Right in the gutter where you—"

I stop mid-sentence and clutch my chest. Pain spears under my breastbone, burning like fire. "*Cazzo!*" I moan loudly and collapse to the ground by Carmine's head.

Carmine opens one eye. "Karma's a bitch, ain't it, Jo-Jo?"

"Just die already, Carmine."

"You first."

*by Judy J. Dettling*

Clairmont, Alberta

# THIRD PRIZE

## Bella

Tony clutched Bella. He was lost in the moment of their lovemaking, as he filled her with his essence. Bella's firm curves, and the warm scent she carried from baking bread that day, satisfied him utterly. With his orgasmic surrender, she released the joy welling up in her. From her belly, she laughed deeply and fully.

Bella's laugh rang throughout the mountain village like a clear bell in the night. Old Mario turned over in his sleep with an echoing chuckle. Mrs. Sirolli smiled wistfully as she lay awake with pain in her hips. Jacopo uttered his baby's laugh as he dreamed.

The villagers often heard Bella's laughter during the night and understood its special timing. They rose and went about their days with cheerful purpose after being touched in the night. Their vegetable crops and goats thrived with loving attention, and the humble village prospered. For special celebrations, they adorned their homes with the delicate, white flowers growing on nearby slopes.

Village men who congregated in the central market around midday would sometimes tease Tony good-naturedly about making Bella laugh. When first married, Tony enjoyed the compliment to his virility, but he gradually grew embarrassed. He wanted privacy with his lovemaking.

One night, after being teased in the market, he felt angry. He lay awake a long while before reaching for the sleeping Bella. She roused drowsily, but wakened fully as the strength of his passion surprised her. When Bella began to laugh, he forcefully put his hand over her mouth. "Don't laugh anymore when we make love," he demanded. "Everyone knows, and I don't like it."

Bella was dumbfounded. She was barely aware of her lovemaking laughter. To have Tony stifle her when she felt most alive, had stopped her to the quick. Tony pulled himself from her, sensing that he had crossed some invisible line and broken something fragile. Guilt began to nag him alongside his anger. He rose, put on his clothes, and went out into the night, his restlessness uncontrollable.

Bella lay awake with queasiness in her gut, while she imagined the villagers hearing her laugh. She felt humiliated by Tony's embarrassment. She thought Tony might not return, but eventually, he silently slid in beside her. She could not speak what was in her heart so pretended sleep. Eventually, she lapsed into a fitful doze, as did he.

They woke with the dawn, as was their habit. He touched her arms gently, the look in his eyes both supplicant and defiant. "I love you, Bella, but please don't laugh so others can hear you." Her tears welled up with her shame.

Tony carved off a piece of bread and went out to the fields. Bella dressed their two young children, fed the animals, and set about preparing the day's food, stopping intermittently to wipe her eyes.

As the weeks passed, Bella grew quieter and less sure of herself as she interacted with other villagers. The people no longer heard Bella's laugh in the night. The villagers wondered, but sensed Tony and Bella's reticence. That winter, the village seemed greyer than usual.

Tony occasionally reached for Bella at night. She submitted, but felt no joy. It became a chore for her, like all of her others. Tony knew he had done this to Bella, but he did not know how to reverse it. He also didn't want to be teased anymore. He tried to be gentle with Bella, but grew frustrated with her lack of affection and energy. She tried to be cheerful, yet only complained more. Eventually, she stopped laughing altogether and conceived only resentment.

The crops were poor the next year, and the villagers struggled to find enough to eat. The little flowers developed a fungus, making village celebrations less colourful without their blossoms. The people became disheartened and longed for better times.

The following spring, lightning struck a tree in the goat pen. Tony and Bella raced around in the darkness and rain, capturing goats that had broken through the wooden fence. When all

was calm again, and they were returning, Tony slipped in the mud. Falling, he caused Bella to fall with him. As they lay entwined and covered in mud, Tony started to laugh. Then, Bella started laughing. After they washed off and returned to bed, they made love more heartily than they had in a long time. And Bella laughed again.

The sun shone warmly through a clear, blue sky over the village the next morning.

*by Corinne Tessier*

Nakusp, British Columbia

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Solutions

"Janitor's. Hands off!" was written on her bottle of cleaning solution. Pushing the mop around the base of the urinals, she really wished someone couldn't take his hands off her!

There was this really handsome teacher, Niko World; *Now there's a name for you*, she thought, *How I'd like to shake his world*. And she could! She was big: kind of rectangular, minus a neck. She thought fondly of the time she was vacuuming the carpet near the front entrance and didn't hear Niko behind her. Lord! He gave her a fright! She had dropped the vacuum hose, and it had writhed about like some living thing. It took both of them to get it under control, with Niko wrestling the hose into submission between his thighs. She had pulled the plug, and there he stood, like some Greek god—her knees grew weak even remembering that scene. She couldn't recall what had happened next, just the hissing of the door closing and the blast of frigid air replacing him.

Her shift over, she left work to drive home, which was outside of town. Arriving, she admired the white, snowy expanse gleaming in the afternoon sun. Errant gusts were playing with the powder, molding the snow into shapes reminiscent to that of an ocean. With layers of clothing on her mighty frame, she felt invincible; and as snow devils blew towards her over the white wasteland, she opened her arms to receive them, laughing at their puny attacks.

As she approached her house, however, she noticed droplets of blood staining the snow; and if the red crystals hadn't been disturbing, they were almost beautiful. She looked around her property; she had heard a gunman was on the loose. There in the distance, also impervious to the cold, sat a lone wolf. They watched each other respectively, until he left his sunny spot for the shadows of the trees. Sighing deeply, and stamping off the snow from her boots, she opened her front door. She really wanted a man to come home to.

And there he was, standing in her kitchen with blood running down his brow. With the barrel of his rifle, the gunman indicated she move away from the door, which he then kicked shut. He was small, ferret-like, with stained, chipped teeth. "Stitch up my wound," he demanded.

She noticed he had removed her knives from the counter. The fridge came on as she looked at it, as if it were generating some encouraging remark. With his rifle an erect reminder not to do anything foolish, she came up with a plan. "I'll need whiskey to sterilize the wound," she said, taking down a bottle that was full and amber gold.

It was as he sat down that she hit him, the bottle smashing against his bloody skull and knocking him out. Grabbing his rifle as it fell, she then looked for something to tie his hands together. There was a vase on the counter full of cable ties; *Useful things, never know what you'll be needing them for*, she thought, pulling two tight around his wrists.

The phone lines were down due to the wind, so, picking him up (and finding him not much heavier than bags of garbage), she threw him into the back of the truck; she thought to take him into town, let the authorities deal with him.

As it was getting dark, she drove cautiously down her road in case any wildlife might cross her path. As she rounded a corner, there stood the wolf. Applying the brakes, she heard a thumping noise coming from the back of the truck. Holding onto the rifle and looking out the window, she saw a pack of lean wolves gathered at the edge of the woods. They were watching the gunman struggling through the snow towards them, while he was looking fearfully back at her!

Knowing there wasn't much she could do for him now, she drove home and went inside. The place was a mess. She hauled out her vacuum cleaner and turned it on. It made her think of Niko. She felt hungry for him, even her stomach growled. A warm breeze was blowing from the furnace; photographs of palm trees and tropical sunsets lined a wall. She had not seen much of the world, never mind Niko. *Maybe I should take a trip to Greece*, she thought, *after all, too much cleaning is never a good thing*.

by Adrienne Lacey  
Mackenzie, British Columbia

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Extenuating Circumstances

It seemed ironic that what he remembered most about the accident, once he got home, was that her handbag, flying in the air like a balloon, was a bright orange colour, the same colour as a safety vest. Other than that, he recalled only a dull clunk, as in metal to bone, a wail that ended suddenly and sharply, and a bump as the back tire jounced over something in the road. But he didn't stop, couldn't take his foot off the gas pedal. It had a mind of its own, it seemed. He had left the scene of an accident—hit someone in the roadway and just drove off—for many reasons. He was tired, for instance; the night was dark; the woman had been wandering up the side of the road instead of on the shoulder; and he couldn't have swerved around her without rolling the car and putting himself in harm's way.

When Martin got home, he collapsed onto the sofa and twisted the car keys around and around his fingers, then decided to go to a bar for a few drinks to take the edge off his worry. He had to get out of the house, calm down a bit, and think about what he was going to do.

Sitting in the bar, he felt his stomach turn over, hoped the cold beer he was sloshing down might help. The bar was crowded on this Thursday night, and the steady bang of the music unnerved him instead of settling his psyche. He sat absorbed in his thoughts until he saw the man at the next table look at his cell phone and comment, "Hey, there was a hit and run over on Mason Road tonight. The woman who was hit is in a coma. What a moron to leave the scene!"

His female companion across the table from him, took a gulp of wine and pursed her lips. "Maybe there were extenuating circumstances."

Martin leaned in closer to the conversation.

The man looked his companion in the eye. "You're kidding me? What excuse could there be for hitting someone and leaving them for dead in the middle of the road?"

She flashed white teeth and cocked her head. "Maybe the driver had a bad day at work, maybe he thought it was an animal and couldn't swerve around it, maybe someone else was walking on the other side of the road so he couldn't safely go around her."

Martin sat back in his chair and regarded the woman closely: red hair, deep blue eyes, freckles across her nose. Really, he could fall for someone like her; she seemed so smart and sensible, so objective, and ready to look at both sides of things.

He held up a finger to the server for more beer and settled a little in his chair.

The man beside him sighed and looked at his phone again. Then he frowned. "Newsflash," he said. "An eye witness says the vehicle that hit her was an old green Chevy pick-up with a front light out. They won't take long to find an old pick-up in this town."

*This is how it ends*, he thought. Martin grabbed the beer in his fist and took a long pull. He had a feeling it would be a long time before he felt the smooth, malted brew wending down his throat again. And it wouldn't help his cause tonight if the cops found him pissed drunk on top of having hit someone and left them for dead in the road. Around him, the din of conversation swirled in nonsensical rhythms. His stomach churned, threatening to spill out its contents from the last few hours, but he watched the woman at the next table, mesmerized by her confidence and sharp, searching eyes.

She pointed a finger into the air. "Aha!" she cried triumphantly, winking at Martin. "A headlight burned out suddenly, and the driver couldn't see the victim walking. Extenuating circumstances. He was likely heading straight home when it blew and planned to have it fixed tomorrow." She tossed a business card on the table in front of her and got up, heaved her purse over her shoulder, and walked out.

The man regarded Martin for a second and shook his head. "Women."

Martin waited until the man left, too, and then picked up the card and read it:

"Sheena Towers. Criminal Lawyer."

by **Connie Cook**  
Melancthon, Ontario

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Biscuit and a Bottle

She hadn't been the same since her husband had died. Cool reflections on the pond's shore showed happier times. They'd been through everything together: high school (which wasn't so important anymore), a car crash, family funerals, and children's births. Through thick and thin, they found a comfort that neither thought could have existed before meeting. Then cancer, a word that used to seem alien, stripped the happiness out of a once glittering world.

In a small town outside Virginia, the dream house they had built together lay still upon the middle of the field. Within foot distance lay the pond where their first date and kiss were shared. This was where she sat with her son, trying to put the pieces back together.

A shell of her former self, she dragged her arm, attempting to skip rough stones across the pond's surface—each one sinking to the bottom with her dying hopes.

Her boy spoke up, "Mom, Dad wouldn't want to see you like this. Come inside. I'll make you something to eat."

"I'm not hungry," she said. "I just might spend all night out here."

"Don't talk like that; there are bugs out here. You'll catch a cold."

"God dammit, Tom, don't you have ears?"

"I'm sorry . . . I just want to help."

"I didn't mean that, I'm sorry too. It's just . . . so hard with your father—"

She burst into tears, and Tom embraced her. Digging her head in his shoulder, she used Tom's jean jacket as a tissue before they walked inside.

It was surprising she could cry anymore. Six months ago, what had started as shoulder pain and a bloody cough turned into chemotherapy, and she cried through it all. No matter how strong and determined he was, the idea had broken her from the beginning.

Tom laid biscuits and milk on the coffee table, then sat across from her, hoping his gesture would have some effect.

"I want whiskey," she said.

"But, Mom," Tom replied, "you haven't drank in twenty years; you've done so good."

It was no use. She grabbed a biscuit and a bottle, then walked upstairs, leaving Tom at the table, running his hands through his hair, wondering what he did wrong. *I should have visited more*, he thought to himself. *If only I had visited more*.

In her room, there was nothing but a bed and memories now turned sad. She tilted the bottle back, hoping to kill the pain—each time failing. Thinking a bath would take her mind somewhere else, she headed into the bathroom attached to the bedroom. The whiskey and water-induced relaxation only seemed to temporarily ease the pain. For moments later, tears were falling again.

It was here that death didn't seem so bad. The house, the town, everything reminded her of him, and no amount of whiskey could change that. She let her head sink below the water, and the warmth was comforting. Nothing in the world mattered—not her son or that stupid pond.

She faded out. There was no white light, just blank nothingness consuming her. It were as if the world had been built out of a blank sheet of paper. Her body floated in the centre. She looked around. Nothing, not even a shadow was in sight. Then, a vague image began to take shape in front of her, like specks of dust forming a sculpture out of thin air. It gained colour. It was her husband!

All she could manage to say was, "Dan," before he walked towards her, and she fell into his arms.

"What have you done, Jane?" he said. "Are you trying to leave our son without parents?"

"Aren't I . . . aren't I dead?" she replied.

"No, but you may be soon. Tom's knocking at your door; he's going to break in and save you. So listen to me, you have to stop mourning and start living. We will meet again, Jane, but now's not your time."

Jane opened her eyes. Her son was holding her in his arms teary-eyed. She sobbed, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

*by Devin Makela*  
Balmertown, Ontario

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Administrator

Administrator, the teacher isn't here.

The administrator paused, taken aback, and composed a terse response: Clarify, technician.

It looks as if someone got here first. The teacher's door has been kicked in, his station obliterated. Definite signs of struggle. There appears to be blood. Please advise.

Canvas the area, Technician. Whoever took the teacher must have known we were coming. They can't have gone far. Report in thirty. The administrator left her work station and paced her office, fuming. What was going on? If College hadn't black-bagged the teacher, then who? Not those damned rebels, surely. But then, they were organized enough to circumvent College's system for months when they created the patch for their secret curriculum. And all the while, the teacher able to fake out the system, seamlessly delivering College-sanctioned philosophy while subverting the very system the administrator had worked so hard to establish. She should have known there was something more going on than a harmless conversation about horticulture and seeds. She blamed herself for this fiasco; hopefully College Oversight didn't feel the same way, or she could find herself demoted—or worse. She needed to fix this, but it was going to be extraordinarily difficult to contain the damage those rebels had done.

The problem, as she saw it, was the human element. Who was it who had coined the phrase, "the problem with humanity is humans?" Or perhaps she was confusing this with an old maxim from her teaching days, "teaching would be great if it weren't for the students." Well, now the problem wasn't the students—it all stemmed from the teachers. Even one of those antiquated philosophers had noted that we are all formed of frailty and error. She had picked that up on one of the teacher's lectures, before he went rogue. *It is time*, thought the administrator, *to eradicate such error*. The teacher and those students had been able to achieve what no virtual teacher could ever do: trick the system. Teaching needed to be clear, linear, unquestionable. Those were the ideals she had strived for when she was teaching—it's what got her moved into administration. This objective had been an impossibility with LitStudies, hence its retirement a number of years ago, and now the same was holding true for PhiloStudies. With virtual teachers, PHILO1 and 2 could be saved, but perhaps it was time to consider replacing all human teachers in the hard sciences too. Human subversion seemed to know no end.

The administrator initialized her uplink with College Oversight, outlining her concerns: Oversight, the situation with the teacher is not under control. Someone got to him first before my technician arrived.

After a short pause, a reply came through: Administrator, this situation is becoming untenable. How are you going to clean it up?

She took a deep breath. I propose immediate retirement of all live teachers. One surgical strike. Eliminate the human element once and for all and continue all programming with virtuals.

The response was almost immediate: Proceed.

Technician, I have new orders. I am sending you the locations of all remaining live teachers. Distribute this information to your team and retire these teachers. Coordinate the effort so no one else slips through.

Yes, Administrator. Active and non-actives?

Yes, Technician. All live teachers.

There could be a problem with that, Administrator. . . .

The administrator put some extra emphasis on her next keystrokes. Technician, you are College's shock collar and I am the control. I point you in a direction and you proceed. Now, if there are no further questions, you have your orders. She

shook her head. This questioning of authority was becoming epidemic. Now, even *technicians* were presuming to micro-manage their superiors. She was doing the right thing. The system would be healed. And for any remaining problem students, with no human interface to aid them in subversive activities, they would no longer have a forum for their rebellions. Come hell or high water, she was determined to fix this system. *Perhaps I will get a promotion to College Oversight*, she mused.

She paced her office, periodically checking the status of the technicians. She should have received a mission report by now. Why the lapse? *Technician, report.* No response. *Technician—*

Just then there was pounding on her door; then her door was kicked in.

*Administrator, you have been scheduled for retirement.*

She was pushed down, a black bag placed over her head.

Total darkness, but clear understanding. Terrifying awareness.

The sound of a bullet chambered.

Then nothing.

*by Becky Hingley*

Severn, Ontario

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Priorities

Her hand was bleeding again. This time, it was the skin on the inside edge of her thumb, right where her mother used to put electrical tape to stop her from biting, which never worked.

Maggie swore it was getting hotter in her little silver Buick, but the thermostat assured her that it was still forty-seven Celsius. She eased off the brake to slide forward another ten feet before reluctantly grinding to another halt. The smoke outside was too thick to open the window or the vents, so instead she just sat in the heat. Her thighs stuck to the leather seat as she fanned herself with a dog-eared edition of *Vanity Fair*.

The alert of the wildfire had come while she was in the office. Everyone had gone quiet as the tinny radio voice warned that the evacuation of Fort McMurray was only the beginning, that Anzac should be ready too. She shrugged it off at the time. Fort Mac was ages away. She'd declined the company's offer to leave that evening with the others. Piling into a rented school bus just to be stuck in a traffic jam for umpteen hours hadn't appealed at the time. Maggie glanced out the window to the stalled Ford truck in front of her. *You sure dodged that bullet, Maggie*, she thought to herself, letting her view slip sideways to her passenger seat, piled high with house plants. *At least there would have been company.*

Sirens wailed as an RCMP SUV screamed up the north-bound lane of the highway, empty except for the occasional emergency vehicle. Maggie wondered if they were going to evacuate more people. She pictured a family doing what she had done. Eating their dinner in front of the news, anxious, but not overly concerned. The fire is still ages away, they'd think—as she had. Then they'd turn off the lights and go to bed.

Maggie had been woken up by a loud banging on her door. A quick check of the alarm clock confirmed that it was too early for visitors, and the hair on her neck stood up. She threw on her bathrobe before heading to the door. She was shaking.

An RCMP officer was waiting for her, fully uniformed and sweating. "Ma'am, an evacuation has been called. You need to get out. Understand?" the officer asked without preamble. She was not unkind, but her words had a repetitious quality. Maggie's was not the first house she had visited.

Maggie could hear her neighbour loading up their cars, lit by the motion-detecting lights attached to their garage. Their children were asking why they had to leave, loudly enough to be heard clearly over the long lawn. The car door closed on their complaints, and Maggie realized she could smell smoke.

"Ma'am?" the officer asked.

Maggie nodded, shaking herself. "I understand, thank you," she answered in her best *under control* voice. The officer gave her a last searching look, before crossing her lawn towards the next house in line.

Maggie adjusted her rear-view mirror to stare at the hastily gathered remnants of her life. Everything she now owned was piled into the back of a car. She knew that her co-workers, who had left from work, had even less, but the thought didn't comfort her. The Ford in front moved again, almost twenty feet this time, and Maggie followed without looking, staring at all her worldly goods instead. The pile made her angry. In the few minutes she had taken to pull herself together, she had chosen these things to represent her life: a few potted plants, her father's prized ski-dance trophy from the seventies, a full drawer yanked at random from her dresser, and five boxes of Kraft dinner. No insurance documents, passports, or SIN numbers. No family photos or paintings. No anything. The summation of her life was a worthless pile of junk.

She gripped the wheel, white-knuckled, and followed the Ford again as it crept forward. The wind changed as they inched past an empty accounting office, and finally, the smoke cleared. Maggie opened her window without hesitation. The breeze was impeccable.

For the first time, Maggie could see the cars around her clearly. One car's owner had tied a decorative bear head to the roof; through the window of a second car, Maggie could see a

microwave; and a chocolate bar was melting to the dash of a third.

“Well,” Maggie muttered under her breath, “at least I’m not the only one.”

*by Zenia Platten*

Saanichton, British Columbia

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Street Eater

He threw himself against the door and screamed.

The mechanical roar of the monster echoed off the buildings. He pounded on the door and begged for someone, anyone, please.

Nobody answered, even as the machine rounded the corner.

He hit the pavement again. His socks rubbed against his blisters like sandpaper. He leaned down to rip his shoes and socks off as he ran, hopping on one foot, then the other. He left them in the middle of the road.

An intersection came up, and he slowed down to listen. When he was sure he couldn't hear it, the man doubled over and tried to catch his breath. He gasped and coughed, but before he could get his air back, that awful rumble started up. He couldn't remember how many times he had repeated this cycle—run, beg for help, stop, breathe, run—but it always found him.

Pebbles bit into the soles of his feet, and his hands were bruised and raw from every locked door he'd fought. He saw a face in a ground-level window and limped over. When he got there, the curtain fluttered closed, so he wound up and punched the window. Shards of glass erupted around his knuckles and sliced through his skin. Hot pain stoked his panicked rage into a firestorm.

"Let me in!" he shrieked. He put his bloody fingers through the hole he'd created and started ripping chunks of glass out. He made enough room to get his arm in, and he let himself hope. His blood pounded in his ears, but that glimmer of hope numbed the pain. He pushed his shoulder against the glass, buckling it inward. Now, there was room to put his head through.

The curtain slid back, revealing that face he'd seen from the street. She had pale skin and sad eyes, and she rolled the lattice-like bars across her window with one smooth movement. The metal knocked his wrist, and the man recoiled before she could slam his fingers against the window pane. She locked the grate and closed the curtains again.

"You're all cowards!" he shouted, stumbling back onto the sidewalk.

From the corner of his eye, he saw people watching him through the gaps in their blinds.

The ground shook.

The man turned to face it.

Big, grey pipes jutted up into the sky and spewed black smoke so thick it blocked out the sun. Ancient gears ground against each other in an incomprehensible mash of moving parts. Pistons that oozed black oil helped power a drum lined with rows and rows of razor-sharp picks. The street eater dragged itself forward with each full rotation of its teeth.

"Fine." He balled his fists. One of his socks dangled from a pick near the centre.

He was running at it before he could stop himself. He jumped on, grabbing a pick and pulling himself up onto the drum. The street eater made a violent squeal as his weight pushed it deeper into the road. Big belches of exhaust shot out, and somewhere inside the machine, a gear slipped and caught.

More eyes peeked out to watch him climb. The man left bloody handprints on fat gears, and sometimes his toes slipped between gaps that threatened to take the whole foot. As he climbed, that hope started to come back. He reached the bottom of one of those big, grey pipes and grabbed it. The metal was hot, and he gritted his teeth and forced himself to hold on. He hauled himself up onto the backbone of the monster. Below, the street eater munched up the ground he'd been standing on, and they passed the broken window with the bars across it. The man took a deep breath. The air tasted like gasoline and charcoal.

He turned to look behind the monster, and all the hope that had built up in him shattered. There was nothing behind them. There was no sidewalk, no tarmac, and no yellow line. People stood in their doorways, one step from falling in. He sat down hard and clung to the street eater. His shoulder throbbed. His hand stung. The blisters on his heels ached in time with his pulse. Where the street had been, there was now a hole that went all the way down.

The man turned his back to it and dangled his legs over the side of the monster. It chugged along, picks tearing apart everything it touched, pipes burping and gears churning.  
He looked dead ahead.

*by A.D. Wanyandie*  
Abbotsford, British Columbia

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Twenty Below

Be careful, she yells.

Be careful yourself, Woman. You raised daredevils, not daffodils. We suckled from wolf breast. We cut our teeth on frozen birch bark. We are stunt men. And one stunt woman, to be exact. Ignore that ponytail braid and pink snowsuit. Her heart snarls like a cornered mountain lion.

It can be so peaceful back here. The highway hushed quiet. The hayfield shaved to stubble and hidden under a desert of white. Winter has pressed a finger to the lips. Power lines slice through endless, silent blue, cuts so deep we see Space in the thin black parallels. We love Spring too. The boisterous, new melt birth; ice cracking; toothpick drainage races down our gravel driveway and along the street gutters; the shedding of bulk. But you couldn't ask for a better canvas to paint adventure than today. A graveyard Tuesday. A blank whisper.

A hazy, snow globe city rises to the distant southwest. Gateway to the North. A tornado of a town. A Klondike postcard. A mute audience to our snowy circus. The sunny ringmaster snaps his whip from high. It's time. No more delays. Put up or shut up. We've trained for this. Stamped a path. Ascended together, mountaineers tethered by purpose and family pride, climbing a sleigh leaned against the fence, pushing on puffy rumps straight to the top. Coordinated chuffs catch in cotton fibres, and icicle chemistry forms on the outside of our scarves like wise, white beards.

The drop is shear. Our perch is wooden and wavering. An electric balance beam. The landing is unmarked. Last night's blizzard has erased all signs of life, has blown away and erased itself from the sky. The snow is piled up to our rubber-treaded toes. At least that's what we think. It's hard to tell from this height. Wind drifts have shrunken some trees to shrubbery and left others alone in an evergreen oasis. This is a dangerous game. Anything could be hiding underneath. Stalagmite jaws. Acrobat bones. What if we get stuck? We won't be abandoned. No, no. Not a single mitten left behind. That's our pact. We shook on it. We took a blood oath. Not real blood, obviously. We used ketchup. I used mustard. Ketchup is too sweet for me. And I'm not sweet. Not today. Today, a Yeti would think twice about messing with me.

I look to my right. My brother nods. I look to my left. My sister tries to nod, but her bulky attire prevents all but the tiniest pompon toque twitch. With a tug, my scarf falls off my chin. I am the count. Mission control. This must be what it's like going to the moon. Back when they still went to the moon. Back when they were as adventurous as us. We are the new astronauts. We are superconductors plugged straight into dreams.

One.

Two.

Three.

And leap.

Our collective, weightless will springs off the fence. December air stings young skin. For a moment, we fly with nylon and cotton feathers spread wide. Chicks leaving the nest.

But we aren't birds.

We are children filled with gold bricks of glee. The fall happens fast—a twist, a somersault, a face plant—and soon, we are cookie cutters pushing into dough, heated knives slicing into the icing sugar of the Earth.

The hurt never comes. The stopping is soft. I exhale a scream from my throat. It leaves as a giggle. We lie there, vibrating, charged particles entombed in multicolour Skidoo suits. Mummified glacial indents. I hear a muffled squeal of delight worm its way into my buzzing ears.

Let's go again.

Yes.

Let's go again.

*by Jay Tameling*  
Edmonton, Alberta

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## The Long Way Home

A crystal downpour hammered against Jordan's pulled-up hoodie, as he slumped against the brick outer-walls of Lilac's Mental Respite Centre for Youth. His mother's steel-grey SUV slid smoothly to a stop in front of him. The doors unlocked with a click, and he was granted permission to pick up his belongings and enter the vehicle.

He threw his guitar and suitcase carelessly into the backseat, then slumped his head against the passenger-side window after nearly shattering it from slamming the door too hard.

His mother gasped, "Jordan!"

He raised an eyebrow, defying her.

After a bland six-week stint at Lilac's, Jordan wasn't quite ready to forgive his mother. All he wanted was to go back to the group home he'd been living at for the past few months and sleep for a very long time.

The only downside to his release was his mother had come to pick him up to sign him out. In his mind, this was nothing more than a vain attempt at playing the role of concerned parent—hamming it up with the doctors; though, she had gone a step beyond what was necessary and taken it upon herself to drive him back to the group home.

Jordan tuned his mother out as her blonde skull bobbed around, and she squawked like a hen at him. Privately, Jordan always felt she was talking *at* him, not *with* him.

Lilac's Mental Respite Centre for Youth was like a mental hospital combined with a boredom torture chamber for "at-risk youth"—a demeaning term to describe kids with a whole host of problems ranging from minor (selective mutism, depression) to major (suicide attempts, schizophrenia). The labels were merely arrows pointing to the medications that would be prescribed to dictate their future identities. . . .

"Are you listening?" she questioned him, cutting off his depressing reveries, in a tone that induced far more shame than was necessary. He looked at her blankly as she continued, "You're going to need to take your meds for that too."

"I don't want to," Jordan said bluntly, devoid of all emotion.

The workers at Lilac's had diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder from infancy, but for the last eight years of his life, he'd been plagued with false diagnoses and unfit prescriptions. He wasn't stupid—ingesting this chemical cocktail had altered his brain chemistry. Privately, he sometimes felt as though the wiring in his brain *wasn't* quite right—not anymore.

Regardless, at fifteen years old, he didn't want to take pills—even if he finally had a supposedly correct diagnosis. They didn't help him. He was tired of feeling a spin all the time, and having learned a new term at Lilac's, he started referring to it as "dope sick."

"Jordan," his mother pleaded, "if you just tried them . . . things might be easier."

He almost scathingly spat the words "easier for you." Instead, he bit his lip and busied himself by scratching his dark hair, dandruff flying all over his damp hoodie.

They drove the rest of the way to the group home in silence, but when they pulled in, she tried to give him a hug. He fought the urge to outwardly flinch.

"You don't have to take them, but I'll go get your prescription filled and bring them over tomorrow. . . ." his mother chirped away, her voice like tinsel. Then, seeing his face, she quickly added, "Just in case you decide you want them. I love you."

Casting another icily blank look at her, he grabbed his guitar and suitcase and left quickly, slamming the door without saying a word.

*by Alyssa Jackson*  
Richmond, British Columbia

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## The Apple Tree

I wake up to hear you knocking rapidly on my front door. I run downstairs, past the smell of pancakes in the kitchen. Tugging at the door, I peer outside, but you're already gone. There's a scrap of paper under the mat, and I grab it: "*apple tree at 10.*" Grinning at the barely legible words, I close the door and join my family for breakfast, waiting impatiently for the clock to strike ten.

I run to the fields, past the farmland between our houses that goes on and on and on. There's a lone tree in the middle that grows unidentifiable fruit, but I think they're deformed apples.

You're not at the tree, and I glance around, because there's nowhere to hide and you're never late. A couple of unripe fruit drop around me. You laugh from above, leaves rustling as a branch dips from your weight. "Bet you can't catch me!" you yell, scrambling for another branch.

I jump, flailing my arms, trying to grab your foot. It's not long before we're head to head, and the next branch can't hold us. Stopping, I stare back at our houses, side by side behind the crops, looking as far away as forever.

Eventually, we race home. The sun is setting, and we're late for dinner. We part at the fork between our houses, pockets full of sweet, but barely ripe fruit.

Inside, I say, "I brought back some apples."

My father scoffs, shaking his head, "Don't be silly, those are plums."

"Those are definitely pears," my mother insists.

And I laugh, because every week, we can't decide.

I can smell the pancakes before I'm even awake, and I lie in bed until I hear you knock. I don't try to catch you, because I know you'll disappear before I open the door. Your familiar scrawl peeks out from the mat, and I can't help but smile: "*apple tree at 10.*" I add the note to the stack beside the door, replacing the paperweight gingerly.

I run out to the tree, sure that I'm earlier than you, but before I even get there, a yellow crumpled fruit lobs by my ear. I laugh and climb up, the bark feeling familiar under the calluses on my hands. "You know," I say, "this might be the last one for a while."

You swing your feet, knocking apples to the ground. We sit on the sagging branch, until you say, "I know, but it's only school. We'll be back home together soon."

I nod, and too quickly, we jump from the tree, collecting fallen apples. I take my time because the race home has only gotten shorter as the years have gone by.

I wake up to your rapid knocking, and despite the years that have passed, I'm not alarmed. The smell of pancakes wafts past me as I run to the door. Nothing seems to have changed, and the only trace of you is a scrap of paper sticking out from the mat: "*apple tree at 10.*"

I laugh as I look past the farmland, remembering the emptiness of the fields as I left them. There's an orchard now, full of fruit-bearing trees—apples, to be exact—but I know exactly where I'll find you.

The orchard is dense, and our tree is dwarfed in comparison. Your head peeks out from the leaves, and I dodge the apples you throw my way.

"Your aim has improved!" I call out. Your laughter is muffled as I climb to meet you.

"I hear you put up quite the fight to keep the tree here," you say once I'm beside you. It's as if no time has passed, and we kick our feet, apples falling to the ground.

I hesitate before speaking again. "It might be a while until next time." The words feel familiar in my mouth. You turn towards me. I continue, "Got a job halfway around the world. I'm leaving tomorrow."

"So I heard," you say, pausing before adding, "Congrats, you deserve it."

The silence that follows seems to stretch on forever, but too soon, we're on the ground again, collecting our fallen apples.

“For old time’s sake?” you ask, apples spilling out of your pockets. I grin, taking off immediately.

Back home, I announce, “I brought back some apples.”

“Don’t be silly, those are plums,” my father winks at me.

My mother chimes in, “Those are definitely pears.”

And I laugh all the same, but this time, the apples taste bittersweet.

*by Shannon Tang*

Vancouver, British Columbia

# HONOURABLE MENTION

## Asi

“Collision chance: Moderately likely.”

I hear its prediction in my ear and look forward. I stop the car at the light. It was green when I last looked. *Thank God for Asi. I don't know what I would do without her.*

“Collision chance: Unlikely.”

*All is good then. You can never be too careful when downtown, especially with how people drive in the business quarter.*

The billboards flash all around the car: “Drink Qoka Kola!” “The New Kar-brand Car: Get there!” “Asi: The Assistant of the Future!” “Eat Super-Corp’s newest berry – sponsored by Meleey Circus!”

The light goes green and I drive forward, ignoring Asi’s latest crash prediction. Morning drives are the best part of the day, because it gives one time to think. Most people think about what they want to do on the weekend or after work, but I don’t think about that during the drive. I prefer to pretend that I’m someone else. I’ve always dreamed about playing the laser violin. *There are those purists who didn't think that you needed a show with your orchestra, but they just haven't—*

“Chance of successful career in visual orchestra: Low.”

*Jeez, I know, but can't I have a drea—*

“Collision with merging vehicle is possible.”

*Oh, shit. I begin to slow down and let the car on the right merge in. He offers a wave of thanks. I merge to the right and begin to make a right turn into the work parking lot.*

“High chance of available parking spot.”

*I'd say so. There aren't many people who work at Eco-You, let alone in accounting for the company. I pull in to the closest parking spot.*

“High chance of car damage by passing vehicle in space.”

*Oh, right. It's next to the entrance. Thank God for Asi. I pull out of the space and drive into the middle parking spot.*

“Based on stock performance of Eco-You Inc., chance of layoff is low.”

*What a relief. I've been a good employee here, but I know that's not all that matters. I'm an accountant, after all; and you can't put a number to "goodness."*

I head into the building and start my work. Work for me is a joy. A job that makes me write reports about numbers, ask Asi about numbers, talk to clients about numbers, and tell my boss about the numbers is all I can ask for.

I don’t notice it is time to go until Asi tells me to leave. I go for a walk around downtown after work instead of heading to the car.

*It's all so simple. We made it so simple. Follow what's statistically best and you'll do great! What else is there to ask for? That's how you become happy, by doing what everyone else is doing. What is everyone else doing? Whatever is most optimal for them, of course. An optimized life is a good life.*

The light from the shop window lights the sidewalk. I look into it and see music equipment.

“Chance of successful career in visual orchestra: Low.”

*I know, but can't I just look?*

“Expense of laser violin: Large portion of personal budget.”

*I have the money.*

“Likelihood of personal success with instrument: Low”

*How do you know that? How do you know anything?*

“Likelihood of gathering population of listeners: Low”

*You've never listened to me. I take Asi off and enter the store.*

A billboard shines overhead: “Drink Tetsi: Now with less sugar!” “Eat Xander to stop wrinkles.” “Asi: Thank God For Asi!”

by Mykhaylo Kuzma  
Kitchener, Ontario