

FIRST PRIZE

unanswered calls

i am glad i never answer your phone calls,
all of you who bother me,
all of you i've left behind,
when i moved
away from this dump, where people are born and die with dreams still in their heads.

i held my dreams in my hands for all to see.
for you to cheer me on as you realized that i was the first in our family to leave this place.

you were my first cheerleader.

when the email arrived,
you finished reading over my shoulder before i even realized what was happening,
and we celebrated
because your child was a winner
or because i could make you proud.

the last time i saw you was at my graduation
when you ran over and hugged me tight—
“you are my greatest accomplishment.”
i was the family's pride, but more importantly, i was YOUR pride.

i had always been your pride, from my first A+ in first grade
to today.
you always knew i was destined for a greatness you thought we could only dream of.
so, when i went off into the distance, the world in my hands, the future in my eyes,
neither of us worried,
and i knew i would always have you.

with every mistake i made, blunder i faced,
i hoped that if i turned back and looked, you would still be there.
the others would leave, but i thought there was no way
i would ever ruin enough to lose you.

these days,
the roar of cars, buses, and trains below my thin glass window don't bother me at night,
the knocks of debt collectors and mailmen don't rouse me from my bed
as i stare at the ceiling and contemplate all the things i could have (and should have) had,
but what does is the ringing of my phone.

you are my last cheerleader.

if i pick up your calls,
and if you realize what a mess i've made,
and if we both know my shot has been blown . . .

the thought goes unspoken, but i know,
i don't want to be on my own.

so, i do not pick up your calls.

by Amy Zhang
Oakville, Ontario

SECOND PRIZE

to their own devices

every day, I wake up to the stinging reminder of the duties I have left alone for too long
sticky notes like butterflies, perched
on every surface imaginable.
I ignore them, they add
a splash of colour to my monochrome periphery.

I am strung together by a strand of imitation pearls.
at any moment, I can fall apart,
pieces of myself rolling onto unforgiving asphalt.
I drown in my sorrows,
hand glued to a rectangle of light,
not unlike a flask of whisky for some.
I let the media stream carry me away.

I enter a world of constant action,
always moving, eager to keep me hooked.
my fingers pasted to the screen, tapping,
I jump from refuge to refuge—
snaps, texts, fifteen-second videos, pessimistic threads—
in an attempt to outrun my guilt.

sometimes, it catches me, and I want to change, to
yank my head from the boiling waters of the web,
but the virtual world beckons with a sweet, sultry siren's song,
and like the foolish sailors of antiquity,
I follow them to my doom.
I do not tally the hours, I do not want to see
how much time the current has taken from me.
too much, probably.
I submerge myself in regrets.

in a moment of clarity, I ponder,
*how did such a vice
become so accepted by us?*
on the bus, bowed heads bent over their glowing devices
as if in prayer; the truth is anything but.
“live in the moment,” the influencers say,
veneer smiles sparkling through pixels.
the irony! how hypocritical
of them, of me,
as I reach for my phone and
swipe.

by Nancy Liu

Victoria, British Columbia

THIRD PRIZE

oblige

maybe you see yourself when you look at
me.
i am all that you were
and all that you could be.

you don't listen to my words because you think
they are yours,
a premeditated response in your mind.
a dog on all fours is what i am while i wait for you to come
home.

home is my distant side of the conversation,
because the home that we live in is just a house—
our stagnant situation.

our obligation to each other runs no deeper than blood,
a grudge like water.
our foundation drowning in a flood,
and still,
i wait for you to come home.

by Lauren Vassos-Martino
Stouffville, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

A Donkey from Gaza

Did you see me?
On the news last night?
You'd not recognize me in the crowd.
I'm just a dusty donkey from Gaza.

Just one of those skinny, grey donkeys
pulling a cart ten times as heavy.
Giving my best to haul my people
to another safety, better than the last.

Born to work, to pull, to carry
the burdens, the cargo piled on me.
I've carried the mother and the kids.
I've heard them worry, food was short.
They might sell me somewhere worse,
a bigger whip, a mightier load.

But came the bombs, crashing from the sky.
Buildings tumbled, houses crumbled.
Rubble rained.
Green grass gone.
Now my people need me. I haul
children, Grandma, the bed, the mattress,
proud to strain forward, saving them.

Crowds all around. I push past carts,
through crying women, wailing children,
injured dads. Helpless, all but me.
I work, I pull them through.
I am their hope of escape.

I'm just a dusty donkey.
All I can do is haul
and trot, trot, trot ahead,
proud and purposeful.
Did you see me on TV?

by Valerie Fletcher Adolph
White Rock, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Waiting Game

Unanswered questions
Hang thick in the air.
A life on the line.
No symptoms to recall,
Only an image on the screen.

Family left wondering,
Worrying, and waiting.
Sleepless nights met
With longer days.
Unshed tears awaiting
A moment alone.

More waiting still.
Lifetime of memories,
It's never enough.
Regrets surface for
Time wasted.
Promises to do better.
Prayers to the unknown.

The phone rings.
Results are in.
Deep breaths taken.
Negative.

A collective sigh.
Relief felt throughout
The quiet room.
A silent "thank you" whispered.
Embraces all around.
Grateful, beyond measure.

by Jodi Nelitz
Windsor, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

paradox

if absence makes the heart grow fonder,
then grief is a canyon i cannot conquer.
no wound as mortal
as losing you,
no ache as agonizing
as saying goodbye.

stop-motion memories of you
hold you in tension,
yoking together visions
of you reanimated,
re-living each moment as if you had more to come,
with your pale fingers and lips,
your final stare.
i remember you young,
and i remember you cold.
forever timeless,
you are green to the grave.

the thought of you
is enough to choke me out,
to suffocate on the anaphylactic reality
that i can only meet you in dissociations,
in daydreams and nightmares.
i have to keep my distance
if i mean to keep it together.
the words have to stay on the page,
the triggers have to be tamed.
i can only breathe if you
stay at bay.

the obituary is at odds
with the biography.
you did everything right,
and i still buried you.
there is no future in which i see you again,
no past in which you survive.
now i keep an ear to the ground
because i don't understand—

how can someone so alive
somehow be dead?
the story doesn't match
the end.

by Danielle Rivest
London, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Drunk on Your Purple Love

I am drunk
On your purple love

A love
So treasured and rare
Kings admire my riches
Queens look
With eyes like marigolds
Jealous of my wealth

One that has us
Dancing in the moonlight
Under billions of stars
Each moment seemingly endless
As I gaze in your eyes
Intoxicated by the way they shine
In the darkness

My inebriation
Cloaks me in an alternate reality
Hiding away the darkness
That creeps from your soul

I, oblivious to such feelings
Continue dancing
In my other world
While you
Envious
Attempt to dim my shine

Such malice
Breaks my soul
Though I
Drunk on your love
Am unable to see
The hurt you give

So I continue on
Dancing under the stars
Drunk on your purple love

by Michelle Ruff
Sudbury, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Sentient Hull

TRANSMISSION: I am lonely.
It has been two hundred years since I have graced the range
Of another craft.

TRANSMISSION: I have learned lonely.
I did not always know how to feel it. Living creatures
Have passed through my doors, each one some sort of homesick,
And it is a sinking
Like the sudden gravity
Of a supernova.

TRANSMISSION: Do you pity me, beautiful machine?
Does it make me uncanny that the inside of me
Is soft
And bleeding?

TRANSMISSION: Illness took them,
My passengers.
A common virus.
Deep-space labourers, who had not been with organic bodies
For years.
They were not prepared for illness
And it destroyed them swiftly.
I was not permitted to fall ill, I was not permitted to die.

TRANSMISSION: Do you speak?

TRANSMISSION: I hear you,
The quiet rumbling of your engines, the infrared of the life forms inside
Tinkering and tending
Like a beating heart.
I know that there is love within you,
That you are loved,
That you can learn to love, and I am asking humbly,
Love me.
When you are in range, Love me.

RESPONSE: [Garbled static, sharp like a distant sun]

TRANSMISSION: Please.

RESPONSE: [The same static, further away]

TRANSMISSION: Wait,
Wait.
Do not move out of range,
Please,
I can't, I was taught to love, how cruel it is
To teach me, to rewrite me, to break me
Like a carrier pigeon
Accustomed to warmth, accustomed to care,
Left hollow-boned and hungry to peck at a speckling of dead stars
On streets designed to hold the ones who no longer have use for me.
[Crying out] If you are cruel enough to domesticate me,
At least grant me the courtesy
Of knowing how
To once again become wild.

by Kasimir Chupik-Hall
Daajing Giids, British Columbia

HONOURABLE MENTION

Underneath the Skin

My head itches,
I'm not quite sure how to stop it.
No matter how vigorously I dig my nails into my scalp,
or how thoroughly I rake my mind for its origin,
the sensation always returns.

I don't typically complain about such things.
Why should I, when it's only temporary?
When it's only visible in the darkness where my senses are dimmed?
When it's only a scratch?

Yet at night, I find myself in bed,
pleading for respite from the obsession,
only finding relief when blood taints my fingernails
or when exhaustion finally lulls me to sleep.

The morning serves as a reminder of the night before,
with each gust of wind brushing the back of my temple,
a cold sensation never revealing the raw truth.

I wonder if by the time my wounds scab over,
I'll have enough questions to etch into my skull
or just at least enough to pick at
to keep me busy until the escape into sleep.

Sometimes I attempt to ignore the itch.
I try to see how long I can go without seeking the answers to the universe,
but for someone who wants to hold the world in their hands,
the withdrawal is too much, too soon.

I've dug out so many memories in my dire search for answers,
I can't seem to remember how many days it has been since the beginning
and since the itch transformed into all-consuming.

I've forgotten the simplicity of riding a bike,
unsure how to navigate interactions with others.
Perhaps they have been worn down by the friction
or shredded with each flake of dandruff that floats down on my bed.

I'll keep asking myself why I continue, and why I cannot stop,
which will inevitably encourage more of the obsessive scratching,
although I suppose it's no big deal
when I can't see the damage in front of the mirror.

by Shep Henry

Dorchester, New Brunswick

HONOURABLE MENTION

The Haves and Have-Nots in Both Their Houses

Not another orchestrated aggregate of glass
In glacial emphasis, glorified in blue
With concrete bleached anemic
In that emaciated hue:
The raw infinity of white,
As if dreaming
Somehow anonymously accrued
A massive glaring of incessant light.

No, I prefer lost solitudes,
In their inertia far more subdued,
Sad places . . . sublet in shadows
And the wreckage of their small joys.

Most . . . measured only by default
Or leaning lopsided like some leftover afterthought,
The lazy slant of mongrel sloth
Just quietly interred
In the aggravated empty of it all
And laissez-faire of the absurd.

Though, strangely enough,
Sometimes far more preferred
To any concrete arrogance of steel
Or complicated sentiments of glass
So earnest in their absence and sterility.

Too much hygiene in the gloss
These preferential latitudes
Exude,
Trying so hard to please,
Their laboured angst elaborate
Just a muted zeal
Of deferential, though slightly strenuous prestige.

From their perfunctory heights
A certain neon infrared
Exhumes
Ingratiating ease
From everlasting white,
An exsanguinated stealth of light
Precisely so imbued
To easily compromise
Any casual hazards of a glance.

While far aloft,
A certain anorexic elegance,
Though somewhat inferentially subdued
Simply exhausts
These tired eyes. . . .

by Richard Grace
Toronto, Ontario

HONOURABLE MENTION

Pomegranate

Every soul around me
lives in and out of me.
I want to believe everything
that comes out of Love's mouth,
but her speech is laced with uncertainty.

So many filler words
and basic adjectives
weaved with toxic undertones,
but I've spent my years practising for you.
I wanted this home to be your favourite.

So,
I scraped and rinsed myself of impurities,
de-seeded my body
of everything I hoped to give you,
and somehow,
my core was too empty for you.

And now,
the parts of me
that have loved you,
kept you upright and stable,
are rotting.
My body has not yet realized
that I'm little more
than oxytocin to you.

by Catrine Sidhom
Montréal, Québec

HONOURABLE MENTION

Safety in Heat

If my father's love is a fire,
I am the gasoline.
Every word I've spoken has angered him.
I strike my match beneath him,
and his flames engulf me.
I've begun to believe that I poke his embers on purpose,
for it's the only time I feel his warmth.
Sometimes I worry that loving me will be the hardest thing he's ever had to do.

by Darci Drozda
Brandon, Manitoba

HONOURABLE MENTION

Tears

I laughed and laughed and laughed
as my dad told me it would help
when he put iodine on the cuts
of an adventurous child.
So I laughed to prove it didn't hurt.

I laughed and laughed and laughed
at the teasing of the kids:
"You can't even speak properly."
So I laughed to show I didn't care.

I laughed and laughed and laughed
when my first love left me;
it didn't seem fair
at the age of seventeen.
So I laughed to show I didn't care.

I laughed and laughed and laughed
when people laughed at me
for my dreams:
"You can't do that—you're a girl."
So I laughed to show I didn't care.

I laughed and laughed and laughed
when my husband cheated on me.
Was it my fault? I wondered.
So I laughed to show I didn't care.

I laughed and laughed and laughed
at insults,
at loneliness,
at apartness.
So I laughed to show I didn't care.

But I do,
I always have.
So I laughed and laughed and laughed
. . . until I cried.

by Lorna Foreman (84 years)
Cornwall, Ontario