



Ayaz Pirani	5
Changhao Li	6, 7
Olive Scott	8
Tehlan Lenius	9
Catherine A. MacKenzie	10
Eric McDonald	14
Tom Bauer	15
Stella Danakas	16
Ingrid Cui	17, 22
Genevieve Sugrue	18
Salma Ragheb	19
Stan Rogal	20
Miguel Eichelberger	21
Ishika Rishi	25, 38
Amory S. Zhao	26
Marie-Andree Auclair	29
Winston Plowes	30
Madi Lentine Johnstone	31
Andrea Perez	32
Nina Katz	33
Josie Di Sciascio-Andrews	35
Brooke Collins	36
Talal Kamran	37
Samantha Gibbon	39
Sacha Archer	40



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Acta Victoriana, est. 1878, is the literary journal of Victoria College at the University of Toronto. It is produced and published on the traditional lands of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit, as well as other Nations that have been, and continue to be, subject to historical erasure. As members of the literary community on campus, we recognize the need to be part of the collective conversation required for the ongoing processes of decolonization and reconciliation.



Letter from the Editors

As it turns out, being Editors-in-Chief involves an unexpected amount of physical labour. We towed box after box of backlogged mail to our office. In our hour of greatest need, the office next door, our neighbours at The Strand, kindly lent us a pair of scissors with which to open them. We have come to appreciate such gestures. Shimmying past an acquaintance in a narrow hall while waving hello. Peeling a clementine with the intent to share it. Folding a paper crane for a friend. Exiting a building after a meeting: the brittle winter air plunging into two pairs of lungs at the same time.

Many of the pieces collected in this supplement of Acta Victoriana occupy a space of transience, inhabiting moments that generate interpersonal connection. Our contributors imagine vibrant cities that envelop the speaker in their many hues. In their work, restless landscapes buzz with possibility and winter evenings simmer with anticipation. In the midst of it all, mothers and their children wonder and wander around each other. In the later works of this issue, our contributors seek out the unknown edges of what the first-person speaker can do for a poem, searching for (and discovering) new ways of understanding the body, through the mechanics of the natural and miraculous.

These acts of generating and keeping our individual and collective memory have always been central to the humanities. It is, at its core, an embodied act of interpersonal connection. Our opening poem, Ayaz Pirani's "Why You Should Marry Me," boldly interrogates intergenerational grief and indeed "come[s] up behind you like a doubt." By the time one reaches the final poem, Sacha Archer has defamiliarized the experience of memory with its speaker which is both disembodied and keenly perceptive. "Unlatched" admits to how "mystical quivering déjà-vu / blankets the instance I reach for," and pares human experience down to the vulnerable "insulated quiet of a collective breath."

The ongoing practice of collecting, publishing, and sharing such outstanding work is the central pillar of a strong literary community. This practice is a method of preserving memory in itself. We are grateful to have the privilege of continuing this long tradition; to collectively breathe.

Elaine Lee & Julliana (Yanni) Santos

Why You Should Marry Me

Ayaz Pirani

When the history of my people
began with a throat-slit

I didn't end up with flowers and chocolate
or generations of goodwill.

I might get a few days off from work
but it will be to whip myself.

There's ten black suited me's
mournfully hanging on in the closet.

Faith goes underground
with words the ear doesn't hear.

By now I've no score unsettled.
If I come up behind you like a doubt

and in a hundred ways approach your neck
it's not to chop your head off.

You can trust me not to poison
the dish you love most.



Untitled — Changhao Li



Untitled — Changhao Li



memory is tactile

Olive Scott

cousins who sit like a row of burst cattails
twisting knots in each other's hair

I weave each outer-strand inward
until I learn the braid

black tress between my palm
an old friendship

at school after swimming lessons
she asks me to plait her damp hair

I smooth her silken blanket
twist it atop her delicate scalp

her hair thins above the cheeks
grows gray around a birthmark

later, when I'm older
his hand sneaks over the pillow
brushes a curl behind my ear

I know where his skull curves
across the crown where root begins

his head slackens and eyes settle
when I run my way through

this is memory
a soft touch upon the nape
another's grease on my fingertip



Look, Mom, Look

Tehlan Lenius

Feed me the scraps of your Sunday mornings;
I'll toast to your indifference, and swallow it whole.

Tell me I wasn't born an echo, lost in the shape
of the future—always the chore that you keep putting off

until tomorrow.

*Mom look, look,
are you looking?*

I can still see you through the kitchen window,
drying dishes and humming strange songs that I buried

out in the yard.

*Do you see,
Mom?
Do you see?*

I'm right here where you left me,
counting down the days until the glass between us

breaks. Will you watch then? Will you
look? When I sink to my knees and cut my

palms sifting through the shards,
searching for one dull enough to hold against

my heart.



Baby Lost, Baby Found/The Weight of Motherhood

Catherine A. MacKenzie

Mary woke, remembering something, remembering nothing. What had nagged at her, dragging her out of her happy dream where she wandered through wildflowers as high as her knees? Perhaps the height of the flowers not an impossibility since she was short, barely five feet. She'd shrunk during the past couple of years, as well as suffering weight loss. She might not remember everything, but she had never forgotten her weight over the years: one twenty-five in high school, one fifteen in university, and much to her delight, around one hundred and five, give or take, after the birth of her child. Her weight during the pregnancy didn't factor into the equation; that was the fault of the babe.

The wildflowers had been as plentiful as flies swarming on a farmhouse windowsill on a sweltering summer's day and spread as far as swaying wheat stalks in the field outside the window. The flowers' colours were as varied and vivid as those viewed in a kaleidoscope: yellows, reds, blues. Even the stalks of wheat, normally bland and dull, shone richly gold in the sun.

She sighed and scanned the room: the four walls, the small window taller than it was wide, and the door from where she always made her escape. No one could box her in.

Rubbing her eyes, she felt tiny crisps of crust in the corners, which jogged her back to the present. The dream was almost forgotten, but something she'd been trying to remember lingered in her memory—that which had taken her out of her dream.

Ah, the baby.

She'd taken Baby outside, allowing it a bit of summer sun after the cruel winter, but she'd brought it back in. She had to have done so, but where was it? And was it a boy or a girl? Whatever the sex, no baby's starving wail pierced the silence of the room. No sudden gulp of breath emanated from its wee mouth.

She hauled herself up on the bed. Baby could be in one of the dresser drawers, but the drawers were closed, all snug into the worn dresser. No way would she have stuffed Baby into an unforbearing drawer and shut it off from the world. She wasn't a cruel person.

She combed her fingers through her sparse hair. Must get up, she thought. Start her day. Go back to the wildflowers. Baby could be there, shivering or starving.

Mary toddled to the window, where she stood on her tiptoes and gazed

outside, her palms flat against the wall on each side of the jamb. She hated the graininess of the glass that distorted the sight, as well as the roughness that felt like sandpaper on her fingertips, and so was careful to never touch the glass. Worse than that, she resented the security bars that confirmed her confinement, for what person in their sane mind would want to break in? No, the bars had been installed to keep her—and others like her—imprisoned. She snickered. As if, at her age of ninety-one, she could fit through the window, jump from six storeys, and land safely.

She tiptoed to the door, careful to not make a creak on the old floorboards. She turned the knob, pulled the door slowly toward her, and peeked out. Brighter than it should be. For a second, she thought it was the sun, but the sun wouldn't be up at this early hour; it was never up this early. It was the moon. She couldn't help but see it creeping through the tall narrow windows, one at each end of the hall. Around two-thirty, she figured, if not 2:28 on the dot. She had an uncanny knack at guessing time within fifteen minutes. Somewhere between 2:15 and 2:30. Too early for anyone else to be up, which was a blessing.

Plenty of time.

She grabbed her shawl from the hook behind the door and stepped into the hall before realizing she hadn't arranged the bed as she usually did. She ambled back, bunched up the pillows lengthwise on the bed, and spread the blanket over the "sleeping figure."

"This'll do," she mumbled. Perfect. She liked everything perfect.

Mary slipped into the hall and slithered down the stairs to the main floor. Still no sign of anyone. Which didn't surprise her. People liked to sleep. They didn't care about others. Not at two or two-thirty in the morning.

She opened the heavy door to the great outdoors, not surprised to find it unlocked. She'd already unlocked it, having just returned to her room from the fields of flowers, but she could've unlocked it had it been necessary; she knew where they kept the key. That's how she'd made her escape those times they locked the door.

"They." She hated them. Hated all the "theys" of the world with a passion. The "theys" who had stuck her away in this dratted place and always interfered in her life, whether asleep or awake. Too often, they woke her from her dreams. Wouldn't let her live her life as she wanted. Turned her into a dodder and demented woman before her time, characteristics she hadn't possessed until they'd stowed her at Sunshine Villa as if she were lawn furniture stored in a shed for the winter, forgotten until spring. Except her winter never ended and her spring never arrived.

The more she pondered, the more she was certain they'd taken Baby. Stolen Baby! Despicable kidnappers! They'd taken it out into the fields. Those fields of wildflowers that she—Mary—loved so much. Baby would love them, too, once it

grew up—if Baby could look beyond the “theys” in the world.

Mary bit her tongue. She wanted to curse, shriek “assholes” and “effen bastards,” but she couldn’t. No, that wouldn’t do. She had manners. Her parents, God rest their sorrowful souls, had taught her well.

She clasped her hands. Yanked her fingers, hearing the snaps that reminded her of snap, crackle, pop as if she’d painlessly broken each digit.

She stopped at the end of the walkway. Which way now? She looked each way, left and right, right and left, as if an obedient child waiting patiently to cross the street. No traffic. But which way? She rubbed her eyes. Nothing looked familiar. How come she couldn’t remember a path she’d trodden many times?

Straight ahead was an empty lot, overgrown with weeds, with buildings flanking each side. Ah! There! That was it. The direction she wanted.

But she hesitated, her heart thumping painfully against her chest. Buildings loomed alongside Sunshine Villa, too, and those massive dark concrete structures scared her. Who knew how many loonies traipsed those halls or what sorts of creatures cowered in the corners, hiding from the crazies.

She looked to the left and right again as if Baby might materialize in the dust.

She clutched her belly and waddled across the street.

And there it was: in the distance. The expanse of wildflowers she’d been immersed in.

As if she were five, she pranced into the thick greenery of the field. A few weeds sported buds, which would soon bloom and add beauty.

She stopped to break off a few stalks of a thick flowering plant, fashioned them into a bouquet, brought it to her face, and sniffed.

A noise. She turned. Thunder? She looked to the darkening sky.

“Must get Baby before the rain,” she muttered. She stepped carefully but quickly. Couldn’t chance a fall. But she must reach the next field, the one of wildflowers, for she was certain that’s where she’d left Baby.

She’d never forgive herself if Baby had suffered ill effects overnight, but the night had been warm. Mary had thrown off most of her linens, so chances were slim that Baby had frozen to death. It couldn’t have drowned; the field was dry. No ponds or lakes for kilometres. Baby could’ve been hungry, but Mary was certain she’d fed it before tenderly placing it on a wooden platform she’d found behind a bush. She’d only ignored Baby for a few moments while she’d picked an assortment of flowers.

She scratched her head. What happened after that?

Glancing down, she thrust out her arm, alarmed, staring at the greenery in her hand. Where had that clump of weeds come from? She let the ugly bouquet fall

and wiped her hands on her flowered nightdress.

“Mustn’t cry,” she mumbled. “Mustn’t cry.”

She looked ahead. To where the colourful field was, where she could gather another bouquet, one more beautiful than the last. The field should be closer, but it looked farther away than when she’d begun her trek.

She ran. Faster and faster. Her shawl flew from her shoulders. She flailed her arms. “Baby? Baby, you there?”

She fell. Found herself tumbling down a cliff but she suffered no pain. *That’s what we mothers do. We suffer for our children. Give up the last slice of cake or pie. Endure sleepless nights when they’re away from home*—just as she was doing this very moment: after awakening from a deep sleep, searching for Baby who should’ve been home, safe in bed.

And then she remembered...

Sabine hadn’t returned. Men in blue had banged on her door at 2:28 one morning. She’d collapsed to the floor at the news. Her sweet Sabby, dead as a result of a motor vehicle accident. Hit by a drunk driver. Didn’t suffer, both officers said. *Didn’t suffer...didn’t suffer...didn’t suffer...*

They were adamant: killed instantly. As if those words—or any words—made the pain less. And how in the fuck did they know...

“Mary, Mary. You’re having a bad dream.”

Her shoulders were forcibly shaken. *Don’t shake me. Leave me alone.*

“You’re quite contrary, Mary. As always.”

Mary, Mary, quite contrary...

They poked the needle into her arm. Maybe more than one. She barely felt the pricks anymore.

She lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. She tried hard to remain expressionless though inside she smiled and grinned and laughed. She’d hidden the bouquet of yellow, red, and blue wildflowers by her feet, under the sheet. She’d even added a few stalks of golden wheat. The “theys” never looked at her feet. They were only interested in her arms. Giving her jabs and more jabs. More and more.

“Never mind,” she whispered. She felt her face flush. Glow, perhaps. She wished she had a mirror so she’d know for certain. But it didn’t matter. Not really.

“Never mind.” She spoke louder this time. Hoped they heard, but no one replied. Were they still there? Still watching, jabbing, chattering as if she was gone?

Didn’t matter. She wiggled her big toe. Felt the petals of the flowers soft against her feet. She smiled, confident she’d see Sabine, no longer a baby, one day.

Soon.



Kerry, Kerry, quite contrary

Eric McDonald

In this, a house that man built,
there isn't a pot to piss in,
not a pit to hiss in,
and the only neighbour is a hillside holy well—
glub glubbing—choking up the Holy Ghost
by the Kerry coast.

Nostrils full of the sniff of turf and green and damp
and, damn it all, this crumbling cottage
isn't listed in the dog-eared pages
of my Lonely Planet,
but good God damn it
because if the holy hand hasn't touched
this wet land, then
glory be, glory be—
there isn't a prayer for the likes of me.



The Old Bells

Tom Bauer

Brass ones, on a woven cord. They hung there
jangling on the front door when it opened.

All gone, the kitchen with the food cooking,
the old table, ashtrays overflowing,
empty bottles, the case under the chair.

In the front hall, tumbleweeds of dog hair
went wisping along grimy wooden floors.
They tracked his mood from corners where they lay.

The door would ring the bells when it was opened,
nails clicking wood, they'd race, excited to see
the famed late-developer coming home.

The half-man knows the old man fills with rage.
He wants to save him, raise him as his own.
The dogs watch from corners where it's safe.



Assume ID

Ingrid Cui

Is it possible, Yang asked, to love someone unconsciously, and not know in your whole life that you love them? Of course, Xie said. For example, you love electricity. You don't know you do, but you do. To you electricity is an abstraction, sparks running through wires. If I asked you to define an electromagnetic field, you wouldn't know where to begin. You don't love it as physicists do. With the exactitude of an engineer's schematic. But electricity is always there. In Boston, in Dallas, in Vegas, waiting to welcome you. Even if you don't know anyone there, or the street signs aren't in your language. If the grocery stores don't have the same aisles as you know, or your neighbors are all Republicans, who bake housewarming cakes you can't eat and then inquire after your health which they well know is uninsured. Maybe they have long forgotten the holidays of your motherland, and do not know the meaning of fellow feeling. But as long as electricity runs, so too does life. You can live, and smile when you come home to your foreign groceries and too-big kitchen. You cannot imagine what it would be like to turn on a switch only for it to not be a switch.

But imagine, one day. Of the four monopolies who run this country's electricity grid, one goes dark. There is no more light, no more heat, no more power to amp up and then complain about wanting to save. You realize that the environmentalist movement could not exist without electricity. Legions of off-the-grid'ers, realizing the same, return to the city, because without city people to feel superior to, there is no reason to persevere through the harsh winters. Those who might have become mass shooters instead decamp to libraries, where kindly, white-haired ladies guide them to shelves of kindred solipsists to peruse at their leisure. Corporate executives finally fulfill their job descriptions: they do nothing, both in practice and in name. After a while, the new world adjusts to the life without electricity. It becomes politically incorrect to speak of better or worse standards of living between those who have it and those who don't. When you go out onto the street, your neighbors are all sitting in their sun-chairs, waving you over to have a warm word with you, you who have learned the language of this land. At dusk, you look up at the streetlamps on the side of the road, silver paint chipping amid public indifference, without knowing why you do.



150mg

Genevieve Sugrue

Maybe it's the bothersome heat lightning of epilepsy that's been dormant a decade

One too many hard hits

The drugs and lack-there-of

One too many times I've accidentally woken when the sun began to bow low

In this moment, my brain is as much a garden as it is a Plinko machine

There's a string of thumps amid the lantanas

And I know too much about too many, and yet oh too little and oh too few

I've got this fuzzy map of muffled clicking in there

It's gone on all week

I don't think I mind it

The beginning of knowledge is when you accept that you are human, and thus,

perpetually a fucking idiot

But with all my idiocy I have certainty that goodness starts with good will

Hatred's not my nature, but, for my own sake, there are times I wish it were

Cause I sway like the trees and forgive too easy

I peer through pseudo-souls into a potential lightness that isn't always there

And burn the candle at both ends—both scalding ends—in hopes I'll find the good in a freezer-burnt heart

And now I tell myself as many times as it takes to take hold

"People who love you will not leave you needing skin grafts"

I'd never call myself an optimist, but I'll call myself out

On the shit I did in Christ's imitation



Feminizing the Fountain — Salma Ragheb



Walkin' in L.A. [reprise]

Missing Persons

Stan Rogal

What helps pass the time. One hand steady on the wheel, the other hung careless out the window, tapping ash from a cork-tipped Craven “A”. One eye on the road, the other on the shifting Strip. Don’t be duped by lurid Hollywood theatrics with its emphasis on the indeterminate & accidental. It’s a pattern when it’s moving only. Thigh & tongue are heavy with it. Keats’s “negative capability.” Stein’s “continuous present.” In blue light or in electric light it has no pathos. Here is the event horizon: each new generation’s attraction to mythologies of youth & visionary ambition. The military metaphor, the burst of tin-type monosyllables & rapid accretion of clichés before the final pseudo-poetic flourish. Machine gun chatter, radio blasting *Vamos a Bailar*. Buzz-buzz, gimme the yeyo, yeah! Unlike me, & I do so, so infrequently. A case of missing persons. Haunted, half-dead characters who reduce themselves to objects. Walkin’ in L.A.? Nobody walks in L.A., though ... suddenly ... (out of nowhere, seemingly, yet) ... a soiled undershirted guy wanders reckless between the steady traffic. A reedy & subdued Al Pacino lookalike sort of guy. Short with deep brooding eyes & soft-spoken & introverted in unfamiliar settings. Total whack job. He drags a bloodied headless corpse behind him, so what? No one gives a good goddamn, he’s a nobody, ‘cause he’s walkin’ walkin’ walkin’ in L.A. Nobody walks in L.A. Seniors hit the malls in golf carts. Half-assed actor wannabes cruise the bars on blades. Kids on skateboards, ad-execs on Vespas. Cops don’t walk the beat they prowl the streets in squad cars. Everyone tarted-up like zombies on a tear. Walkin’ in L.A.? Nobody walks in L.A. Maybe it’s the heat & maybe it’s the ocean fog playing tricks. Maybe it’s the angel dust. More likely just another porno *cum* horror-slasher-mobster flick in the classic De Palma style. Whatever, don’t be duped by lurid Hollywood theatrics: *el hombre guapo el sol amarillo*. Unlike me, & I do so, so infrequently. A case of missing persons. Haunted, half-dead characters who reduce themselves to objects. Walkin’ in L.A.? Nobody walks in L.A.

NOW

Miguel Eichelberger

in a sliver of Toronto’s beating heart
taken through a dirty hotel window
a thousand lines slope, and meet
and are ministers for multitudes
of conjoining efforts.

a man sleeps or is dead
in morning sun cast by angles just right,
spot-lit by a thousand efforts.
the hospital identification band on his wrist
includes last night’s time and date.

three harried gentlemen in uniform
scrub yellow paint from a Massey Hall
side door.

the smells of uncountable spice combinations
samba with the sour perfumes of the alley—

screens leap over the street,
over the bucket-drummer who also sings.
that he catches any attention at all
beneath the humming rectangle eyes,
the flashing, frantic sky-wide eyes
of the city—

that says something quietly.
too quiet to wake a sleeping man,
or a dead one.



Exegesis of a Patient in Vienna

Ingrid Cui

i dreamt of you, freud once said
was emblematic of *oceanic feeling*
that strange anomaly which cannot be explained
by ordinary methods of analysis

and indeed, it is only because i
respect rolland, that i term this not *mere chatter*
but something which might exist
though i have not felt it myself

but surely you have loved, comes the answer
and yes i have indeed
loved that girl pushing a shopping cart
of persimmons
out into the moon;
i thought her beautiful
even though the strange man
calling out her name
was not me

—that was my youth,
now i live my days like water
flexible to all, but
inexplicable to none
and they call my name in austria
that dead land, of skirt-flapping girls
partaking in merry laughter—oh,
the good old days!

i know a friend, beth, who paints
the misery of street urchins.
she has no husband, the dry air
she makes into art.
it brings the patrons to tears and they pay dearly.

when you lifted your skirt
to show the stockings underneath
i shall never understand the shame
that came over me, made me
throw my arms around you
and prevent the footman from seeing

the mister says, that is normal
but i know better. my father says,
that is not how it should be. my mother says,
nothing. she smiles a little warmly.
mister, how can i sum up
the sum of my existence
when i do not even know
where the start begins?

you have hysteria, the doctor
tells me. no matter—i always
loved my parents.
hysteria is temporary, the moon
forever. it loved me in the light
and i was *lustrated*.
in our darkest hour,
a girl opened her arms to the sky,
and bellowed.

these days, if i can go to
a show in new york, and stroll out
into the afternoon sun,
i will be happy

because the silence in milan
is due to the sea.

i have made preparations to leave vienna
and i shan't be coming back here.
mister looks at me sadly,
was there anything i could do?

i say, you could have been the footman
in another life. *i have always thought*
ketty, showing me her stockings, that
you were beautiful—but i was paying
for the last life, a thousand years ago,
and could not hear. *running down the alleyway*
you were quite a sight; so next time
even the guard would agree
speak a little louder,
won't you?

you say, it will all fade into literature.
i say, it is a modern tragedy
because the principle of sufficient reason
is not observed.
you come into my room at dawn
and drink some coffee, talking of politics.
on another world line, i do not say
i dreamt of you.

Dinnertime

Ishika Rishi

My finger traces the ends of a frayed tablecloth
Another comes along and then another
Together they braid the ends into a knot
Cloth into cloth
Skin into skin
As if the meal is here
In this nervous searching.

The meal
Has gone straight to my eyes,
My nose, my mouth and then my innards
Where in bodily torment
It must escape.



Undeliverable

Amory S. Zhao

Tomorrow was shaping up to be a very big day for Pierre. A large and important package was to be delivered at noon, and he was to receive it with all due promptitude and solemnity. Twenty-four hours' notice to prepare for the arrival of such a large and important package! Pierre was not sure if it could be done, but he was determined to do his best or die trying. The handling of the package was an honour conferred upon him beyond his wildest imagination. The future was all bright before him.

His commute home was consumed in the musings and conjectures of the next day. As he climbed up the narrow staircase leading to his one-bedroom apartment at the edge of Manhattan, he pondered whether he should tell his wife and children of the good news. It was a sign of prosperity to come, yet he was not sure if informing them would necessarily involve disappointing them in the future. It was safer. It was kinder. It would be almost cruel to raise their expectations only to fail to receive the large and important package properly.

The apartment door was thrown open before Pierre had a chance to make up his mind. While domestic felicity was always a welcome tableau, Pierre could not concentrate as his wife rambled on about her mundane day throughout dinner. Her quaint day and quaint worries almost made him wish that he did not accept such a critical assignment. Heavy were the hands that must receive a large and important package. He passed his evening in the humdrum of domestic life without participating in it. His mind was too wrapt up in the implications of tomorrow.

It was just before seven when Pierre stepped into the crowded subway. The weekend was near enough for the Thursday commute to be of a cheerful sort. A stranger smiled at Pierre when he stumbled at a particularly sharp turn in the tunnel. Pierre then decided that it will turn out alright after all.

By 10 AM, Pierre was jittering with anticipation. He wished that he had not downed his coffee in a moment of lethargy, which followed a period of heightened excitement. He grew more frantic the more the clock hand dragged itself through that wretched circle. It was deliberately slowing down to spite Pierre and thwart his chance. Five minutes later, Pierre was sure that the clock must be wrong for it seemed to hurtle towards noon as if a teenage boy was behind the wheels, propelling it forward recklessly.

Reckless. Everything felt reckless. Pierre was sure he was reckless with his

own capabilities when he agreed to sign for the package. He would inevitably drop the large and important package. It would be smashed into pieces, and he would be fired from his job, and he would have to go home and tell his wife and children that yes, he was fired from work today. Yes, he had been entrusted with a large and important package but had failed miserably and now they must all shift about as well as they can and make do with his wife's income as a teacher.

The clock hand had reached twelve and passed it before Pierre was able to tear himself away from thoughts of self-pity. The afternoon was stealing away and the package was nowhere in sight! He became apprehensive. But then, the mailman was only human, and Pierre must make allowances for the little flaws and whims common to all men, although the mailman was no ordinary man, although Pierre himself was determined to practice none of the little flaws and whims common to all men in this most consequential matter.

It was near 3 PM before his boss finally returned, and Pierre dreaded his inquiry.

"Any mail for me, Peter?"

"Ah, I am afraid not, Sir. I've been waiting here all this time. No mailman and no—"

"I see. Thanks. Would you bring them up if there is anything?"

"Of course. Sir. It would be an honour, Sir."

Pierre's boss gazed at him strangely while he rambled on with his civilities and with an "Alrighty then," walked away from him still trying to convey the depth of his gratitude. But the day passed without any sign of a mailman or a package. He told his boss much of the same when he left two hours later. He shook his head and seemed to look at Pierre with a sense of disappointment that pierced him through his uniform down to his very flesh. The pain of his boss's disappointment rested heavily on him all the way home. The commute was no longer cheerful nor brief. It was more tedious than he could bear. It made him want to stand up and scream at all these people, standing, leaning, and dozing off in the subway car.

But he did not stand up. He did not shout. He simply watched while a man pissed his pants in the corner. The urine gradually made its way down his legs and pooled around his shoes. There was a mild shuffle as disgusted commuters try to sidestep the liquid, but they were squeezed in too tightly for that. Pierre rather admired the man for it. Here was a man with no regard as to the availability of a toilet and the staleness of the air.

But Pierre could no more control his life as that man could control his pee. A flash of red from a Coco-Cola ad outside the darkened subway window reminded Pierre of a poem he had learned in high school, which he then modified to

his own inclinations:

So much depends
upon
The tan-uniformed mail
Man

It was all he could remember but he was pleased with the allusion nevertheless. It made him feel relevant. He always knew he wasn't the literary type, but it felt good to pretend that he was if just for a minute while he was speeding through Manhattan through its dark underbelly.

He was suddenly in a church, Trinity Church in fact. He wanted to see if giving over his life to a higher power would make him feel better. But the Second Coming felt too much like the promised and anticipated arrival of a large and important package that Pierre almost turned away in disgust at once. Only the liturgical music stopped him. He was touched, more than he could describe and more than he would care to admit. It elevated him above the dust piles and money piles that made up New York and led him to imagine he could escape the city. Pierre began to dream. and he collected those dreams, fervently, hungrily as if he had been starved of nutrients for a long, long time. He dreamed of the city and the push and shove of the masses while he snaked through the streets. He dreamed of his wife, standing in front of a house with a lawn, beckoning him home for dinner while his boys played on the grass. Pierre stood up. He reached for her hand and at the point of contact, he fell. He fell and he was not sure if he would ever stop falling. Yet, it was not a hard fall, speeding towards an ending that was sure to end in an onomatopoeia. It was gentle, like a feather floating down a long tunnel but it was falling nevertheless. There was a moderation to the motion that reconciled him to his present state. Let him fall then. Let him fall through the endless tunnel until he might be lulled into a dreamless sleep. He was powerless to stop his own descent so there is really nothing to do but allow it to happen. Pierre hunched forward in his pew and wrapped his greatcoat around him as tightly as possible. Let him fall.

The music stopped. The singing stopped. Pierre had hit solid ground gently without the oblivion he had so hoped for. He stood up and left the church. He was going to the subway station. He was going to go home.

From the Top

Marie-Andree Auclair

Tonight, we slump on the sofa
dead to tempos that not so long ago
braided us on the dance floor.

Argentine tango, bandoneon music
guided our steps into passionate sequence
and still we crushed each other's toes.

Repetition has bred no harmony yet.
Two glasses sit in front of us
in their sweat circles.

The bottle is empty
its spirit exhausted.
I pour the contents
of my glass into yours
and you drink up.

I kick my dancing shoes
under the coffee table
far from my feet and you.



Autumn Windows — Winston Plowes

Tree / Drink

Madi Lentine Johnstone

Tree,
I thirst. You drink.
Your body like a straw,
you built yourself to penetrate the unseen
where there is always water.

Penetrate me.
My mouth tastes foul behind its mask.
I want to wet my feet in your mud,
but my shoes are laced
with blood from your rubber cousins. My soles stay dry.

We hardly feel each other.

But tree,
you who grew near sewers
and learned to drink the storms that shake you
know only love —
that is, entanglement.

So reach for me with your thirsting roots.
I am a tube of filth
and little more.
That's why I'm yours.
Cradle me, your sewer, and drink.



doe

Andrea Perez

the dirt beneath is not enough to comfort her.
insides gnawing, lungs decompressing, veins knotting,
her stomach filled with ladybugs and walnuts,
inflamed to twice the size it used to be.
delicate coat of brown fur melts off her bones,
even the berries she loves smell like gasoline.

the dirt beneath is not enough to comfort her.
but from her swollen pores,
chrysanthemums, and calla lilies,
and crimson columbines grow.
her acidic tears water life. and she is told,
that her suffering is for a purpose.

every full moon she returns to the same place,
abandoning her simple life of meadows:
watching as the moon kisses the reflection of liquid silver,
making friends with every blade of grass,
feeling the pollen-filled wind tickle her ears,
because Mother Nature needs her elsewhere.

she is no stranger to blood.
how it scrapes her skin raw,
turning dirt to mud,
small intestine poking out of her jaw,
seeping into flower buds,
choking, drowning.

she knows it will come just,
as she knows that she will eat ladybugs and walnuts again,
that the moon will rise over her favourite pond,
that her insides will betray her,
that the meadow waits for her,
and that the dirt has never comforted her.



Div Horse

Nina Katz

A day before my sister's birthday
And two before mine,
My mother and father arrived at the
Delightful decision to reveal,
Like demented magicians,
That they were getting a divorce.

As they sat us down on our shedding couch,
My ten-year-old self wondered vaguely if
My mom was pregnant.
In hindsight, I suppose she was, and heavily!
Seconds from giving birth to my new reality.

In their last performance of synchronicity,
My parents lingered over therapist-rehearsed theatrics
And psychologist-directed phrasing but
I promptly paused on the word *divorce*
And pulled it apart.

Divorce. Div. Orse.

Div is divide divided, I deduced,
And my mind morphed *orse* into horse.

So as my parents tearfully assured us that
 We were their sun, sky, and heart,
 That this would never change, even after their part,
 I internally chanted,
 Div-Horse Div-Horse Div-Horse.
 I half-debated neighing but decided, nay.

Perhaps detecting my distraction,
 My mom determinedly dimpled,
 “Do you have anything to say, Nini?”
 I should stop horsing around, I thought hysterically.

That night,
 In the stable of my dreams,
 I watched as teams of stallions
 Surged valiantly up towards a medallion sun,
 Bodies unbroken and moving as one.

The First Christmas Without You

Josie Di Sciascio-Andrews

There will be no turkey this year.
 No candied cake. No celebration.

Now that you're gone
 The feasting is outside the house.

Snow falling on the familiar landscape.
 Sparrows feeding on your lawn.

Berries red in the thorn hedges.
 Squirrels thriving in the yard.

As of late, so many missing cat posters
 On hydro poles. Coyotes and foxes

Killing anything smaller
 And weaker than they are,

In blind, narcissistic predation.
 Ferocious, like the invisible

Illnesses decimating us
 All on the inside.



Le Swan

Brooke Collins

Bronwyn tells me she's been thinking about God
On the walk home
We agree humans are beautiful
Jesus is in the harmonies
And ice cream tastes best when
We have spent the afternoon tossing it around in ziplocs

But I can't stop flinching away from men
Even in the midst of a glorious conversation
That makes me pine for an empty church

If I saw Jesus on the street I'd probably cross at the lights
Just to be sure



Tangerine

Talal Kamran

I blush maroon but I secretly wish I
blushed your tangerine hue. I swoon
over your figure's travesty of the Platonic spherical ideal – planet Earth isn't perfect
in shape either, after all.

Not much separates us – after beguiling passersby with the façade of a zestful life, our aftertaste
is oft judged comparably trite; lapsed lovers discarding torn remains
in search of juicier delights. Still, I picked you from the grocery-store aisle.

Perched in my palm, my fingers caress your velvety exterior
like God cradling creation on the seventh day.

But more powerful, primal forces at play transgress and
like a tiger mauling its prey, canines
tear flesh asunder and I
chomp and I
devour and I
consume.

I never even bothered to peel.



Sacred Song

Ishika Rishi

I will never love you in my own tongue,
In the sacred song the river
brings to me.
I stand on sandbanks
made of poems,
songs,
laments to the moon—
all raising their throats
at the simple inconveniences of a moment apart from you.

The songs crash against rapids
and the force
 splits the words
into foot taps
and translated hums
which sound to me just as they sound to you.
Still the ground beneath me erodes slowly,
and secretively, as if I will never notice
how the language I stand on is growing silent
and how the water laps at my feet and
the sands sing as they drown
and disperse.

I hold on to a willful ignorance.
On the windiest days
I am too in love to learn to swim
so all I do is drink what is left of the river as it paces past me.

I wet my lips and plant them
Gently on your shut eyelids.



Untitled — Samantha Gibbon



Unlatched

Sacha Archer

Unlatched, the word surfaces unbidden,
but then one thinks of a baby on the tit, which
maybe is appropriate, except that I was driving
as if I was not driving and couldn't feel the car
beneath me. And Simone in the backseat singing,
swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me
home, whenever the chorus came round. I was just outside
of my body. It could have been measured in mm's
or grapefruits, neither would have come even close.
And then just now, barely visible in this gargantuan
snowfall, dragging the blue box through the gate
and wondering if the kids'll be home, if the buses will run...
maybe it's just the insulated quiet of a collective breath
held, pensive and alert, that's worked its way in,
unnerving, but I'm not myself. Unlatched,
the gate, no matter how hard I push, has given as far as it can
against the ridiculous drifts. I light a smoke
standing at the door before I go in
through those lost rooms
and that mystical quivering déjà-vu
blankets the instance I reach for,
so that, in a sense, I fall through.



Contributors

Amory S. Zhao is a fourth-year student at the University of Toronto. She enjoys poetry but writes only in prose.

Andrea Perez is a first year humanities student from Victoria College. She loves writing poetry, short stories, and plays in her spare time—especially character driven stories. She hopes to double major in Drama and English, learning the art of storytelling in its many facets.

Ayaz Pirani was born in Tanzania and studied humanities in Toronto and Montreal with a degree from Vermont College. His books include *Happy You Are Here*, *Kabir's Jacket Has a Thousand Pockets*, and *How Beautiful People Are*. His work recently appeared in *The Malabat Review*, *Guest 16* and *The Antigoniish Review*.

Brooke Collins is a fourth year student at the University of Toronto studying English, Creative Expression and Society, and Cinema Studies. She is from Sarnia, Ontario.

Catherine A. MacKenzie: Cathy's writings can be found in numerous print and online publications. She has published several short story collections, books of poetry, and children's picture books. She writes all genres but invariably veers toward the dark—so much so that her late mother once asked her, “Can't you write anything happy?” (She can!) She published her first novel, *Wolves Don't Knock*, in 2018, and *Mister Wolfe* (the darkly dark second in the series) in 2020. She's also written two volumes of grief poetry that commemorate her son Matthew, which she hopes might help other grieving mothers (or fathers): *My Heart Is Broken* and

Broken Hearts Can't Always Be Fixed. Cathy divides her time between West Porters Lake and Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Contact her at: www.writing-wicket.wordpress.com

Changhao Li (he/him) is a graduate student at OCAD University, IAMD program with a bachelor degree from University of Toronto, double majoring in Art History and Philosophy. As a Toronto-based photographer and art historian on the academic track, Changhao's primary research interest is in contemporary East Asian and Western aesthetics. He aspires to explore the philosophy of Yoshinori Ōnishi, which venerates transience and natural imperfections in contradistinction to the Eurocentric art forms favouring perfection and eternity. Changhao's current research examines the transculturality of Yamamoto Masao's picturesque photography in relation to Haiku, Wabi-Sabi and Western Modern art.

Eric McDonald is an alumnus of Victoria College and former editor of the *Acta Victoriana*. He lives and works in Toronto.

Genevieve Sugrue is a second year English and Cinema Studies student. Her style takes forms ranging from grimy to ethereal as she explores the psyche of a young woman trying to make sense of (capital “E”) Everything. Sugrue's interests include film cameras she can't afford, playing chess poorly, and the moon.

Ingrid Cui is a student at the University of Toronto whose work has been published in *Montreal Writes*, *Ghost City Review*, and *Ricepaper Magazine*.

Ishika Rishi is a fourth year student studying Literature and Critical Theory and South Asian Studies. She enjoys cooking large meals for her friends and going on long meandering walks. she wrote her first poem in grade five about the extended agony of the first day of kindergarten.

Josie Di Sciascio-Andrews has written seven collections of poetry and two non-fiction books. Her poetry has recently won an international prize in Rome's Citta Del Galateo Contest. As well, her poem "The First Time I Heard Leonard Cohen" has been nominated for the 2022 Pushcart Prize. Her latest book of poems, *Meta Stasis*, was released in June 2021 by Mosaic Press. Josie is a member of The League of Canadian Poets, the Ontario Poetry Society, the Italian Canadian Writers Association and The Heliconian Club for Women in the Literary Arts. She teaches workshops for Poetry in Voice and is the host & coordinator of The Oakville Literary Cafe series.

Madi Lentine Johnstone is a writer and an excellent cook who's about to graduate from the University of Toronto with a Specialist in Socio-cultural Anthropology, a Minor in Writing and Rhetoric, and a Minor in Creative Expression and Society.

Marie-Andree Auclair's poems have found homes in many print and online publications in Canada, the USA, UK, Ireland and Australia, most recently in Bywords (Canada); Flo Lit Magazine (Canada); Young Ravens Review (USA); and forthcoming in Blue Lake Review (USA). She lives in Ontario, Canada.

Miguel Eichelberger has had over 60 poems appear in literary magazines around the world including Harpur Palate, the Literary Review of Canada, Plainsongs Magazine, Poetry Salzburg, Existere, and the pacificREVIEW. His first short story was published in the Rappahannock Review in 2021, and his screenplay was just optioned by Ripple World productions. His play, Stupid Cupid, ran to 4-star reviews at the 2018 Edinburgh, Brighton and Vancouver Fringe Festivals; and again at the 2019 Camden Fringe.

Nina Katz is a poet and playwright born and based in Tkaronto (Toronto), Canada. She has experimented with a wide assortment of poetic styles, from confessional contemplation to biting satire. Nina delights in imbuing her poems with interesting sounds and rhythms, believing that the oral quality of a poem is integral to its beauty and meaning. She is interested in feminist social critique but also in personal explorations of topics such as memory and guilt. She is passionate about the beauty of humour and loves exploring how it can be used to lighten or darken a piece. Her strong connection to her Jewish identity also informs and contributes to her work.

Olive Scott (she/her) is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Saskatchewan. She obtained her BA in Classical Civilizations from the University of Toronto. Her favourite pastime involves trying to pet every cat she comes across.

Sacha Archer is a Canadian writer and concrete poet. His most recent publication is the chapbook, KIM published by knife|fork|book. Other recent publications include Mother's Milk (Timglaset), which was included on CBC's best poetry books of 2020 list, Hydes (nOIR:Z), Jung Origami (Enneract Editions) and Immortality (Viktlösheten) as well as a collaborative sound poetry album with nina jane drystek, Years Between Rooms. Forthcoming are his books Empty Building from Penteract Press and cell-sea from Timglaset. Find him on Facebook and Instagram @sachaarcher.

Salma Ragheb is completing a joint major program in Visual Arts and Neuroscience.

Samantha Gibbon is a member of the Metis Nation of Alberta and a descendant of Peayasis Band in Northern Alberta. She was raised a otipemisiwak (Metis) and Nehiyaw Iskewew in Treaty 6 Territory on Papaschase

Land (Amiskwaciywaskahikan/Edmonton). She currently a senior student physician at the University of British Columbia, and she is a mother to her 19-month-old daughter, Valentina. Creating is the fire that fuels her, as she's been an active artist, writer, dancer, and craftsperson my entire life. Although she currently live on Syilx territory, miteh (her heart) forever lies in the prairie brush of her ancestral homelands of Northern Alberta.

Stan Rogal lives, writes and walks his Jackabee in Toronto. His work has been published in magazines and anthologies in Canada, the US and Europe. The author of 25 books and several chapbooks. He has an MA English from York U and worked with health professionals to improve their technical and communication skills at UofT. An amateur philatelist and oenologist.

Stella Danakas is a student at the University of Toronto, in her third year, studying Theatre and Performance Studies, and Literature and Critical Theory. A writer, actor, and aspiring photographer, this piece displays what it means to her to be in love, how quiet it can be and yet so, so loud, and the dark places in which we can find it.

Talal Kamran is an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto. He'll spend his time this winter managing nosebleeds, snowboarding less than he would like, and working away at very important things.

Tehlan Lenius is a third year student at the University of Toronto, majoring in Literature and Critical Theory with minors in English and Creative Expression and Society. They spend most of their time fantasising about their next writing project, and very little of their time actually writing it.

Tom Bauer is an old coot who lives in Montreal and plays board games.

Winston Plowes produces conceptual natural artwork by experimenting with what comes to hand and the never ending gift of random chance processes by formalising the coincidental and emphasising the patterns that exist, hidden in plain sight all around us. The thought process that support his creative assemblages might be considered as references to the dream worlds that elude us all. He always carries with him the statement of Andy Goldsworthy who said that "outside we forfeit the right of possession" whilst engaging in the 'serious play' that fills the pages of this book. His art responds directly to his surrounding environment and often evolves from a random incident or on some occasions is based on a seed from which he has developed the preparatory sketches that come with this book. Often these are framed instances that would otherwise go unnoticed in their original context. The more he works with natural materials the more he has become aware of transience and loss and wonders if his practice as a land artist could perhaps help him learn lessons of how to live with those ideas.



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