

An abstract painting with a complex composition of bold, expressive brushstrokes. The color palette is dominated by deep reds, blues, and yellows, with accents of black and white. The texture is visible, suggesting the use of thick paint. The overall mood is dynamic and somewhat somber, with a sense of movement and depth.

SEA WOLF

LITERARY REVIEW

Islands Short Fiction

Ekphrastic Poetry

Nanaimo Arts Council Vol. 2 - 2025



Your Library, Your Creations

Writing Contests and Artist Programs

Access to Millions of Books and Materials

Sea & Cedar Literary and Arts Magazine



Visit virl.bc.ca for literary and artistic inspiration



Visit Nanaimo Art Gallery

Exhibitions, Tours, Workshops, Gallery Store

150 Commercial Street
Snuneymuxw Territory

nanaimoartgallery.ca
(250) 754-1750

Admission by donation



Poetry Trail

LOCATIONS:

1

Queen Elizabeth Promenade
North Side of Lion's "Great" Bridge

2

Harbourfront Walkway
McGregor Park

3

Bing Kee Trail
Bing Kee St & Columbia St

Learn
more



Designed to spark reflection and creativity outdoors, the Poetry Trail places poetic prompts along city trails, inviting residents to engage with poetry in everyday life. More locations coming in 2026!



SEA WOLF LITERARY REVIEW

Sea Wolf Literary Review, a free magazine published annually by the Nanaimo Arts Council, features winning entries from the *Islands Short Fiction Review* and the *Ekphrastic Poetry Celebration* competitions.

PUBLISHER Nanaimo Arts Council (NAC)

MANAGING EDITOR Steven Dennis

ASSOCIATE EDITORS Amelia Watford & Jenaya Shaw

GUEST EDITOR Sandra Wolfe

MAGAZINE TITLE Laurent Lemay & Jenaya Shaw

COVER ART Harald Wetklo, 'Boomerang'

All contents copyright © 2025 by the contributors.

ADVERTISERS WELCOME

Please contact nacfrontdesk@gmail.com for ad rates.

EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE

PO Box 401, Station A

Nanaimo, BC, Canada V9R 5L3

or email nacfrontdesk@gmail.com

NAC BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Steven Dennis, President

Ange Frymire, Vice President & Secretary

Dana Smiley, Treasurer

Oliver Nagano, Director & Bookkeeper

Namrata Verma, Director & Program Chair

Victoria Clements, Director

SIGN UP FOR MEMBERSHIP

<https://nanaimoartscouncil.ca>

DONATIONS

This magazine depends upon donations. We appreciate your contributions to nanaimoartscouncil.ca.

FUNDING

Financial support for NAC's literary programs was provided by the City of Nanaimo, the Province of British Columbia, Culture Works Canada, Vancouver Island Regional Library and Arts Council members, donors and sponsors.

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA

ISBN 978-1-7380521-0-3 (Print)

ISBN 978-1-7380521-2-7 (Online)

CONTENTS

5 EDITOR'S NOTE

6 Jennavieve Strub - '*someone I used to know*' 1st
an ekphrasis of '*A New Chapter*' by Charlotte Mougeot

7 Lily Heppell - *Strays*, Junior 1st

9 Anthalia Umanetz - *Marigold: Carnation Rescue*, Junior 2nd

11 Fantino Durante, *The Tortilla Chip People*, Junior 3rd

14 Aidan Collier - '*Final Sailing*' 2nd
an ekphrasis of '*A New Chapter*' by Charlotte Mougeot

15 Catriona Hicks - *Reimagined*, Youth 1st

18 Solana Van de Leur - *The Girl of Ink and Fire*, Youth 2nd

20 Ihmani Josh, *The House Guest*, Youth 3rd

23 Jessica Blackburn - *Josef's Lake*, Adult 1st

26 Erin Tzvetcoff '*Reflections of myself*' 3rd
an ekphrasis of '*Powerful*' by Jenny Adams

27 Jennavieve Strub - *Words That Float*, Adult 2nd

30 Emerald Ayres - *Becoming a Man*, Adult 3rd

33 Paige Pierce, Youth Poet Laureate, '*Religion*'
an ekphrasis of '*Euphoria*' by Tabitha Gimbel

34 Neil Surkan, Poet Laureate, '*when I hold*'
an ekphrasis of '*Blur*' by Kim D. Arthouse

35 ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

We respectfully acknowledge that we live on the traditional and unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples, specifically the Snuneymuxw, Snaw-Na-As, and Stz'uminus First Nations.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Nanaimo Arts Council created the Sea Wolf Literary Review to showcase the winning entries from the Islands Short Fiction Review and the Ekphrastic Poetry Celebration, programs designed as creative outlets for emerging writers, poets, and artists. Since the inaugural edition, we are encouraged by how it fosters personal growth, scholastic achievement, and career development, underscoring its importance to our collective future. We hope community members feel inspired to engage and support this vital part of our local arts scene.

Volume two features short fiction stories representing nine remarkable writers from three age groups - junior (12 and under), youth (ages 13-18), and adults (19 and over) - and three ekphrastic poems - poetry inspired by visual art - submitted by local artists to the Ekphrastic Poetry Celebration. All works are printed with only technical edits to preserve their originality. Readers will also enjoy commissioned poems from Nanaimo's 2025 poet laureates, Paige Pierce and Neil Surkan.

We are grateful for the volunteers who are responsible for producing literary programming and this magazine - students, educators, and creatives who serve as editors, judges, program coordinators, and contributors - including staff and faculty from Vancouver Island Regional Library and Vancouver Island University. Their collective participation helps sustain and grow this valuable platform for local talent. And special thanks to all the writers and artists who submitted their work.

Islands Short Fiction Review

Program Coordinator - Jenaya Shaw

Judges - Julie Carter (Junior) & Darby Love (Youth)

Advance Readers - Tracy Balanik & Elke Sorensen (Adult)

Final Judge - Kathy Page (Adult)

Ekphrastic Poetry Celebration

Program Coordinator - Aslynn Meade

Judges - Paige Pierce & Neil Surkan

Videographer - Andrew Kolasinski

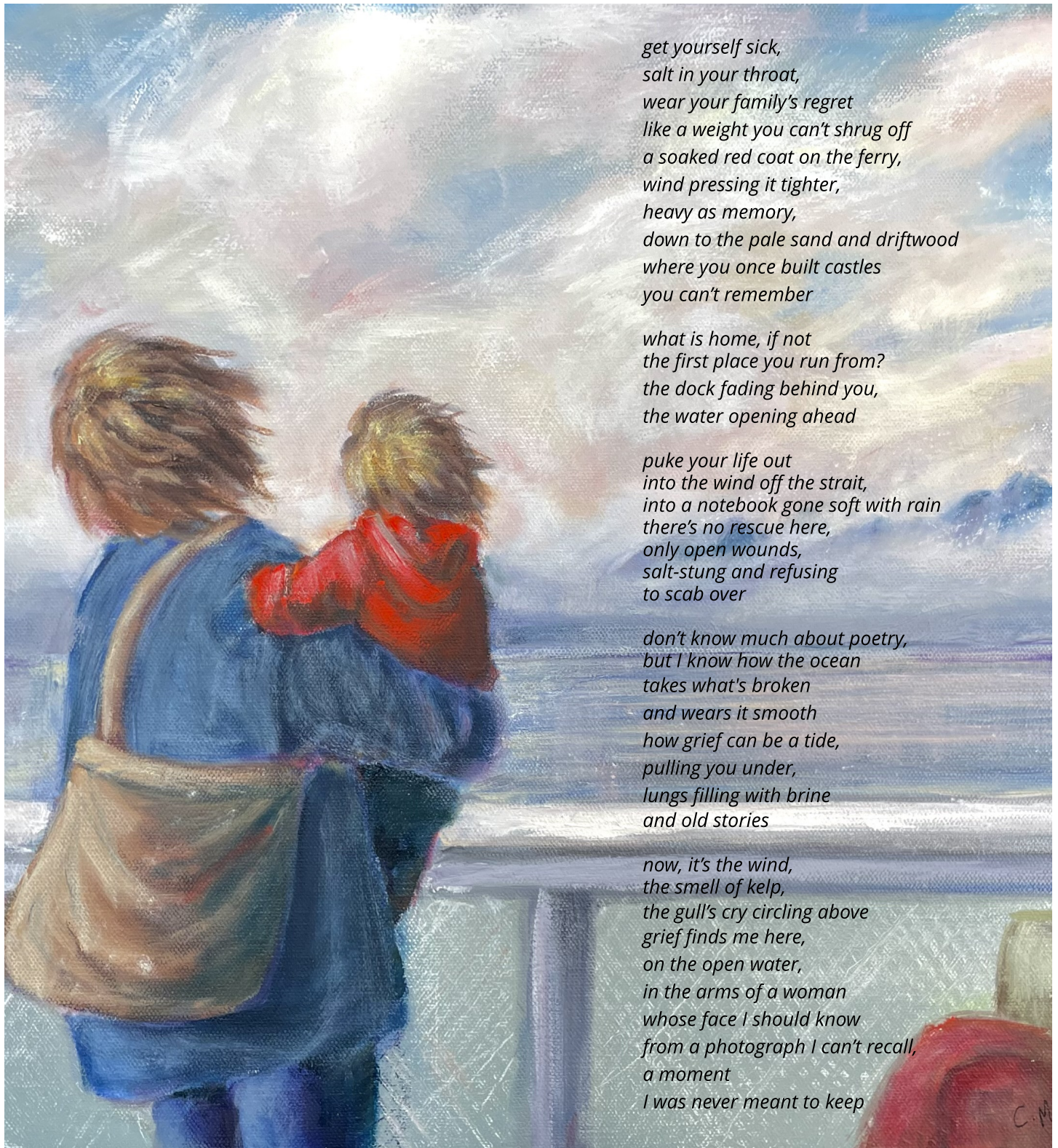
Sea Wolf Literary Review is registered with Library and Archives Canada and distributed by the Vancouver Island Regional Library. It is also available at Window Seat Books and Well Read Books in Nanaimo.

The Nanaimo Arts Council is a grassroots, volunteer-based charitable organization made up of local artists and arts organizations. The council supports artists across various genres, notably in visual, literary, and media arts, by developing programs and engaging the community through print and online media, as well as public exhibitions held in venues throughout the city. We welcome everyone interested in pursuing arts and culture in our community, including artists, writers, arts organizations, businesses, volunteers, donors and sponsors.

Steven Dennis

someone I used to know / A New Chapter

Poet - Jennavieve Strub / Artist - Charlotte Mougeot



*get yourself sick,
salt in your throat,
wear your family's regret
like a weight you can't shrug off
a soaked red coat on the ferry,
wind pressing it tighter,
heavy as memory,
down to the pale sand and driftwood
where you once built castles
you can't remember*

*what is home, if not
the first place you run from?
the dock fading behind you,
the water opening ahead*

*puke your life out
into the wind off the strait,
into a notebook gone soft with rain
there's no rescue here,
only open wounds,
salt-stung and refusing
to scab over*

*don't know much about poetry,
but I know how the ocean
takes what's broken
and wears it smooth
how grief can be a tide,
pulling you under,
lungs filling with brine
and old stories*

*now, it's the wind,
the smell of kelp,
the gull's cry circling above
grief finds me here,
on the open water,
in the arms of a woman
whose face I should know
from a photograph I can't recall,
a moment
I was never meant to keep*

C.M.

STRAYS

Lily Heppell

I was running through the alley, as fast as my paws could take me. Every turn I took, the pound was gaining on me. I was scared. I didn't know people could run that fast. I kept turning corners, trying to lose them. I didn't know where I was going. I turned left, hoping I would be back on the streets. It would be harder to find me there.

I was wrong. It was a dead end.

I panicked, looking for a place to hide, but the pound had already caught me. I tried to act brave.

"You don't want to mess with me," I said in a voice that wasn't as brave as I hoped. "I'll tear you to shreds."

This probably didn't sound threatening coming from a golden retriever. They lunged forward and grabbed my scruff; I tried to move away, but they were too quick. I bit their hands, hoping they would let go, but they didn't. Their grip was like steel; I couldn't break free no matter how hard I tried. I waited. They started talking on these glowing blocks. I couldn't understand them. After they started talking, a van pulled up. It was white with tinted windows and a lot of words and numbers I couldn't understand, and they pushed me into the van.

The van was gross. The smell was worse than death; I could even taste it. I held my breath, but that didn't last long. The drive was forever! I didn't even last seconds. I was already about to throw up, but the sight of the pound made it worse. There were all kinds of animals: dogs, cats, even birds. Why? The cages were so small, and you had to share with others! I was put in a cage with four other dogs: Coco, a small shi-tzu; Rocky, a border collie; Marshall, a pitbull; and Martha, a black Newfoundland. I introduced myself as Lucky, a golden retriever (that was the name my humans gave me). I looked around the room, but everything was so dark, even Martha looked invisible. The room was empty except for the cages. There was one small door at the front of the room and no windows.

When our food came, it looked worse than what I ate as a stray. It was beige in colour, smushy, and smelled like vomit. All the other dogs seemed to scarf it down, so it couldn't be that bad, right? Correction, yes it can. The food tasted bland with a bad tinge to it. I had a few bites but decided I couldn't take it, so I just gave it to Martha.

"How can you even eat this?" I asked Martha.

"You get used to it after a while," she told me.

I don't think I'll ever get used to it, I thought.

The night was worse than the day; it is cold when you sleep in a squished cage. When I woke up, the room was hotter than usual. I hadn't thought much of it since I got here. It might've been outside. I walked over to Rocky. He looked scared.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "It's never been this hot."

"It's probably just hot outside," I assured him. He didn't look positive, but he agreed. I sat down.

"Isn't the food supposed to be here by now?" I asked him.

"Yeah, but it's always late," he said, looking sad.

I got up to walk away, but before I could stand up, I heard a loud boom! I was shocked. I didn't think that was part of the daily routine. The room was already hot, but it started to heat up fast. A fire started spreading around the room quickly. I was scared we were all still locked in our cage. I tried to break the bars, but they wouldn't budge. I looked at everyone else, but they looked just as confused as I did. The fire was still spreading. Soon, it would reach us. I looked around to see what was causing the fire, and I saw one of the food processors burnt in half and in flames. The room was now hot; I touched the cage bars, and it felt like putting my paw in a volcano. The bars started melting after I took my paw off it. Soon they were just piles of goo. Me, Martha, Coco, Rocky, and Marshall

carefully avoided the melted bars and ran out the doors that were now open from all the people running in and out.

We started heading down the mountain, towards the forest which was now close. Going down the mountain was not easy, it was steep, it went straight down. I almost fell many times. It took almost ten minutes to walk six feet, and took hours to make it to the bottom. When we made it, everyone looked exhausted, but it was still light out.

"Let's just take a break," Rocky said between breaths.

We all sat down in the grass while Marshall took Rocky out to help him hunt.

When Marshall and Rocky got back, they caught one rabbit and two mice. We evened out the food. I got a small piece of rabbit and a piece of mouse. After we ate everyone seemed ready to walk again.

"Another hour or two," Rocky told us.

We walked in silence for about an hour.

"I'm tired," Coco complained.

"Do you want me to carry you?" Martha asked her.

"Yes please!" Coco said jumping onto Martha's back.

After Martha and Coco were ready, we kept walking. We were now about an hour from the forest. Everybody seemed excited. Coco was jumping around on Martha's back and Rocky kept pacing whenever we stopped. The only person who didn't seem excited or nervous was Marshall.

"How are we going to survive in the forest?" I asked Marshall.

"The same way we're surviving now," he replied. "We'll find shelter and hunt for food."

The forest was nothing I would have imagined, there were trees everywhere. It was nothing like the city, there were no buildings, cars, or anything. The dirt was wet and squishy under my paws. The forest was cold and wet, but in a nice way. We went deeper into the forest, to look for shelter to build our home.

"Well, here we are," Marshall said.

"The forest!" Coco squealed in excitement.

We kept walking until we made it to a cave that looked perfect for a home. The cave was huge and decently hidden, so no others could find it.

Marshall and I went to look inside to make sure there weren't any animals living in it. The cave was gorgeous. The inside was massive, and perfect for a home. There weren't any other animals in the cave, so Marshall and I went out.

"There weren't any animals," I said.

"Great," Martha replied.

"But what if it is someone else's home?" Rocky asked.

"I doubt it," Martha told him. "No animal would leave their home in this weather."

So, we all built our home in the cave and were never bothered by anyone again.



MARIGOLD: CARNATION'S RESCUE

Anthalia Umanetz

Marigold Blossom, the horse, climbed over the wall that marked the FlowerClan village. She was very thirsty, so she headed for the stream beside Storm Forest in the field belonging to the FlowerClan. In about ten minutes of cantering across the beautiful springtime plain, she reached the edge of the forest, getting thirstier. But there it was!

Marigold galloped over, took a long, refreshing drink, and was standing up when she heard a large thunderclap and felt a strong gust of wind. She looked up, only to see that the sky was a shade of dark grey and the sun had disappeared. It was definitely a rainstorm. The rain started to pour down harder than she had ever seen, and the winds whipped her mane aside. Marigold ran and ducked under a thick tree on a small nearby hill, sheltering herself from the storm.

Out of nowhere, she heard an unfamiliar humming noise coming from a large boulder on the hill. This boulder was nicknamed 'Hologram' because there was another boulder up in the branches above it. If the FlowerClan moved the boulder in the tree, the boulder on the ground seemed to shift around as if it were a hologram. The humming got louder.

Suddenly, a purple-saddled horse appeared in front of the boulder on the ground! Marigold was about fifteen feet away from him, and he flickered in and out in a crazy way. His mane stayed perfectly still, even though he was in the midst of a storm.

He began to speak in a staticky, hypnotized voice. "Your sister, Carnation, has fled. You know she is terrified of storms. When the storm became visible in your Clan's village, she fled towards FireClan territory. Your Clan thinks the FireClan has her captured. For reasons unknown, only you can save her."

Marigold gasped. She knew her sister was in terrible danger if she had indeed fled to the FireClan village. She opened her mouth, wanting to speak to this strange horse, but he disappeared before she could say a word.

Suddenly the wind and rain died down and gradually stopped. And just then, a huge watermelon

fell out of the sky, nearly obliterating her. But she dismissed the thought of the watermelon.

Shaking the water from her mane, Marigold worriedly trotted towards her village, hoping to set out for the FireClan village in the morning. She took a dust bath once she got back to her small yellow house. This may be the last time she ever saw her home, so she wanted to enjoy it. After which, she made some good reasoning, and with great difficulty, convinced her parents and King Spruce, leader of her Clan, that she could go. She then went to bed.

The next morning, Marigold stretched up and said goodbye to her comfy, flowered turf pile and headed into the main room. She nuzzled and said goodbye to her worried dad and stepmom.

"Goodbye, Marigold," said her dad, General Dandy.

"Bye, Dad," she said.

"I'll miss you," said her stepmother, Daisy. "Stay alive. We'll see you again."

"Oh, I'll miss you so much," Marigold said. She hoped with all her heart that she would see them again. Then she set out the door. She checked the mailbox as she left, and there was a letter for her, so she tucked it into her mane for safekeeping.

She decided to say goodbye to her schoolfriend, Tulip. She had graduated last year, when she was five. Tulip was still in school, but he would graduate next week.

She trotted across town and, in around two minutes, came to Tulip's neon orange house. It was a Saturday, so Tulip would be home. Marigold tapped on the door and heard hoof steps approaching. Tulip opened the door. He was wearing a tuxedo!

"Hi, Marigold," said Tulip.

"Hello, Tulip. Why the getup?" Marigold asked.

"My aunt's first wedding is in an hour, so we're probably leaving in a few minutes."

"Well, I'm going on a dangerous quest to rescue Carnation from FireClan, and I might never see you again."

"Um—" Tulip said with a taken-aback expression.

"It's complicated why it's me that's going," Marigold explained.

Suddenly, Tulip's mom, Daffodil, burst out the door, saying, "Tulip—it's now, move along or we'll be late!" She grabbed him and started galloping away.

Tulip looked over his mom's shoulder and yelled, "goodbye, Marigold!"

After him, Marigold yelled, "goodbye, Tulip."

Then, she took the other path, heaved over the wall, and started going.

After about half an hour, Marigold came to the thick Poppysed River. She jumped in and swam across as fast as she could, coming out dripping wet.

"Yih!" she said, shaking her fur as best she could. But there was no time to stop. Her sister may be hurt by now. She braced herself and cantered faster. She ran so fast that the early fall dandelions were yellow blurs, faster and faster across the sprawling plains. She would never stop hunting as long as the most important thing in the world to her was still alive. Driven by fierce love for her sister, Marigold ran on.

She kept it up. Her hooves were exhausted, but she did not care one bit. *Carnation was alive*, she told herself. *Alive, and I'm going to save her*. Daisy petals were caught in her tail. Her hooves were worn and tired. Her mane was tangled from the wind. All of her coat was dry and crusty from the river. But she simply did not dare to stop. *The world will turn, the sun will rise, the night will fall, but Carnation will not die!* she told herself, fueling her more than any sleep or food ever would. Marigold would run.

After another hour, she hid behind a wall on the outskirts of the FireClan village. She was rather tired.

Marigold heard a noise above her and looked up, only to see the face of a young FireClan staring down at her.

Marigold nearly screamed, but then she recognized the horse.

"Phoenix!" she whispered.

"Marigold?" said Phoenix.

"Come up here," Phoenix said, pulling Marigold up into the village. "We've got lots of FlowerClan visitors. Keep this bracelet on, and you'll fit right in." She slapped a metal object onto Marigold's hoof, and they headed into the village's center.

Marigold was silent. She had heard a noise coming from the largest cottage. Then, Marigold spoke.

"Do you have Carnation here? Please tell me."

At this, Phoenix paused. "...Well... It's just... Okay, fine." Phoenix paused and took a deep breath. "We did have her captured. But maybe General Blaze shouldn't have put her in the same room as the monster world portal."

"What?" shrieked Marigold, loud enough that several horses nearby turned their heads to see what the commotion was.

"Please don't be mad at me for the General's mistake," said Phoenix.

"I'm not mad at you," said Marigold briskly, "but I need to go save my sister."

With that, Marigold raced into the largest cottage at terrifying speed, pretty much destroying the door. She did not stop to fix it. Sure enough, the cell was empty and—Marigold gulped—had a portal in it! And so, before she could change her mind, she swung open the gate, daisies knocking out of her mane and tail, and she jumped straight into the portal. She felt a tingling sensation throughout her body. She thought, *Carnation, you are safe now that I am coming. I am coming. You will live.* And then everything went black.

The logo for the National Oceanic Council (NOC) is displayed, consisting of the letters 'NOC' in a stylized, bold, sans-serif font.

THE TORTILLA CHIP PEOPLE

Fantino Durante

CRACK!

I hit the ground hard, unable to think of anything other than the pain that flows through my crunchy, corn tortilla shell of a body.

Be tough, Chip. The words of my tortilla chip father echo through my head.

I wiggle my hurting tortilla chip legs on both corners of my triangle-shaped body as I see a tall, stocky person walking past me with a confident strut.

"Help us, please!" I hear a voice trailing away that is coming from the plate that the person is holding, and from which I fell. I recognize the voice immediately. It's my friend Tort, short for tortilla. I named him myself, since I was made two minutes earlier than him. The thought brings my pain-filled body to its feet. *Tort, I can't let him get eaten! Not today! Not ever!*

I run as fast as I can with my stubby, triangle legs that are cracked and bruised. But it makes no difference. The distance from me and the person that is holding my tortilla friend hostage is getting farther.

The person stops at a table and places the plate down on top of it.

"For your appetizer, chips and salsa," the person says in a calm voice. "Enjoy," they add as they hurry off.

Do they not know what is going on? I think to myself. *Do they not know they are feeding people innocent tortilla chips?*

Now that the plate is resting atop the table, I am able to close the gap between me and my chip friends in no time. But when I get to the table, I am confronted with an even bigger problem: I can't get up to the table with only my two legs.

I look around, hoping to find something that might help, but I find nothing as I hear voices speaking around the table.

"These are good chips," one voice says, as I hear one of my companions screaming as they get chewed.

"They sure are," another adds, munching down another lost soul. "I hear they're handmade."

I slump down on the floor, shedding tears for my lost friends, thinking all is lost. But then I hear another voice, and not just any voice. It's the voice of Tort!

"I'm gonna jump!" he says.

I jump to my feet again and look up to find Tort staring down at me from the edge of the table.

"You'll die!" I scream back up at him.

"If you can survive a fall from this high, so can I!" he replies, jumping off the edge of the table.

That's our friendship for you. If I can do something, then Tort can do it too. But if Tort can do something, he claims that I can't. How unfair is that? He always thinks he is destined to be the hero, and I'm always destined to be a soul to be saved.

Tort lands with a KERSPLAT and gets up right away.

"I'd like to see you do that," Tort says to me proudly.

"I already did," I reply, "I fell off that plate. And that was from higher up."

"I remember," Tort says admittedly, "but that wasn't intentional, so it doesn't count."

"I lost a piece of me from my fall," I spit back, "so my fall was harder to survive."

"That's not true," Tort counters, "your head's chipped because your shell isn't tough like mine."

"So what?!" I reply, "this chipped part of my head is now sharp enough to cut through plastic. Plus, it goes with my name."

"First off, there's no way your chipped head can cut through plastic," Tort says. "Also, I'm pretty sure you're named Chip because you're a chip."

"Alright fine," I agree. "We don't have time to argue. We have to get out of here!"

"We can't just leave the others!" Tort responds with emotion.

"Look up, Tort. They're being eaten," I remind him, "they're beyond saving."

"Yes, but we could save the others," he responds. "The ones that aren't being eaten."

"How?" I ask. "Sure, we could save the few that are already made. But what's gonna stop this place from making more?"

"What are you talking about?" Tort replies, "did you get amnesia from when you fell off that plate? This place doesn't make their own chips. Those dummies don't know what they're talking about. They fall for anything. We are made in a chip factory far away from here in Mexico."

"What?!" I shout, surprised. "But even still, what are we gonna do about it?"

"I have a plan," Tort says, "but it's gonna require a lot of stealth."

Tort runs me through his 'stealthy plan,' which consists of running into the kitchen, opening the bags where the others wait, hoping for help, then making a break for the door to the outside world.

"What are we going to do, and where are we going to go once we make it outside?" I ask.

"We'll figure that out once we make it," Tort replies. Without time to waste, we make our way to the kitchen, trying to be quick but stealthy. We make it there in a matter of minutes. Tort and I both look around, searching for the bags of chips.

"There's the chip bags," Tort says, pointing his right leg at a cabinet very close to the ground and opened slightly to reveal several chip bags.

We creep towards the cabinet cautiously, worrying that this is too good to be true. Once we make it to the cabinet, we hop inside, feeling relieved. I look ahead of me to see hundreds of chips imprisoned in plastic chip bags.

"How are we supposed to open these bags?" I ask.

"I didn't think of that," Tort admits. "But now

would be a good time to prove that that chipped part of your head can really cut through plastic."

I hesitate a second. I made that up to sound cool, but I can't tell Tort that, so I nervously walk up to a chip bag in front of me and put the chipped part of my head against the plastic. I know it will do nothing, and Tort will be proven right, but it's worth a shot.

Slowly, I run my head against the plastic. To my surprise, it works! The bag slices open, leaving a large opening along the front of the bag.

"You know," Tort says, "I thought you were lying about the 'cutting through plastic' part."

I don't tell Tort that I was lying, so that I can keep the bragging rights.

"Hello," a voice coming from the bag says.

"Come with us if you want to live!" Tort replies.

"Ooo-kay," the voice says. "I'll tell the others to come along."

Hundreds of chips suddenly come pouring out of the bag, all greeting and thanking us for freeing them.

"We are not quite free yet," Tort tells them.

As Tort explains the plans to the army of chips, I open the rest of the bags, expanding the army of chips with each bag I open. After about twenty minutes, we have all of the chip bags opened, and Tort steps out of the cabinet alone, giving us the 'all-clear' sign, signaling that it's safe for us to follow him out.

It turns out Tort didn't do the best job checking, as we discover two tall people standing on either side of us, staring down at us.

"Ummmm... Tort," I say, staring up at them. "What should we do now?"

"I have a good idea," Tort responds, "RRRRUUUUUNNNN!"

Instantly all the chips run, including me and Tort, towards the door. As I run, I look back, surprised to see the two people just standing there in shock as they watch us run away. We round the corner, exiting the kitchen, entering the final stretch towards the outside world. We sprint as fast as we can as the people sitting at the tables stare down at us, as in shock as the others, as if they've never seen chips run away before.

After a few stressful minutes, Tort and I lead the way outside, followed by the army of chips.

"Free at last!" we all say happily.

"But where should we go?" I ask.

"I don't think we have much time to decide," Tort replies, as he stares off into the distance.

"Why's that?" I respond.

"See those crows over there," Tort says, pointing over to the parking lot where two crows fight over a piece of cookie. "I don't think they're going to ignore us for much longer."

"Yes, but those crows are dumb," I tell him, trying to soothe his worries. "See how they're both fighting over a cookie when there's a whole bag of potato chips right next to them."

"Sounds like you and me," Tort jokes, still worried. "Choosing to fight over something dumb instead of admitting how lucky we are to have each other."

I laugh. He is right, we do fight over lots of random, stupid things.

"We don't have time to bond," says a voice from among the crowd, "I think the crows see us!"

Things go from bad to worse as both crows start flying towards us at a fast speed.

"Run towards the forest!" Tort yells.

"There's no way we can all outrun the crows," another voice from the crowd says.

"You're right," Tort replies. "We aren't all going to be able to make it."

"Tort, don't tell me you're—" I begin.

"It's the only way," Tort cuts me off.

"The crows will fight over me. And by the time they're done with me, you guys will be long gone."

"Run!" Tort says, shoving me away from him. "Run towards the forest! And make that my last wish!"

I run away with the others, tears flowing from my eyes as I look back to see Tort being brutally ripped apart by the two crows fighting over him.

"Goodbye my old friend," I whisper to myself.

After Tort's sacrifice, we traveled many days and many nights under the cover of long grass, with the glow of the moon to guide us, making it as far away as possible. Legend says, we traveled five hundred meters (I still don't know how far that is, but it must be pretty far) until one of my comrades (whose name I still don't know) found a rabbit hole in the ground. With great fear but no other choice, we walked inside the hole to discover... a family of rabbits.

It turned out the rabbits were vegan, and since they considered us "alive," they welcomed us with open paws, giving us rooms to sleep and churches to believe in.

This isn't just the story of Chip. This is the story of the Tortilla Chip People, and how they came to live in a rabbit hole.

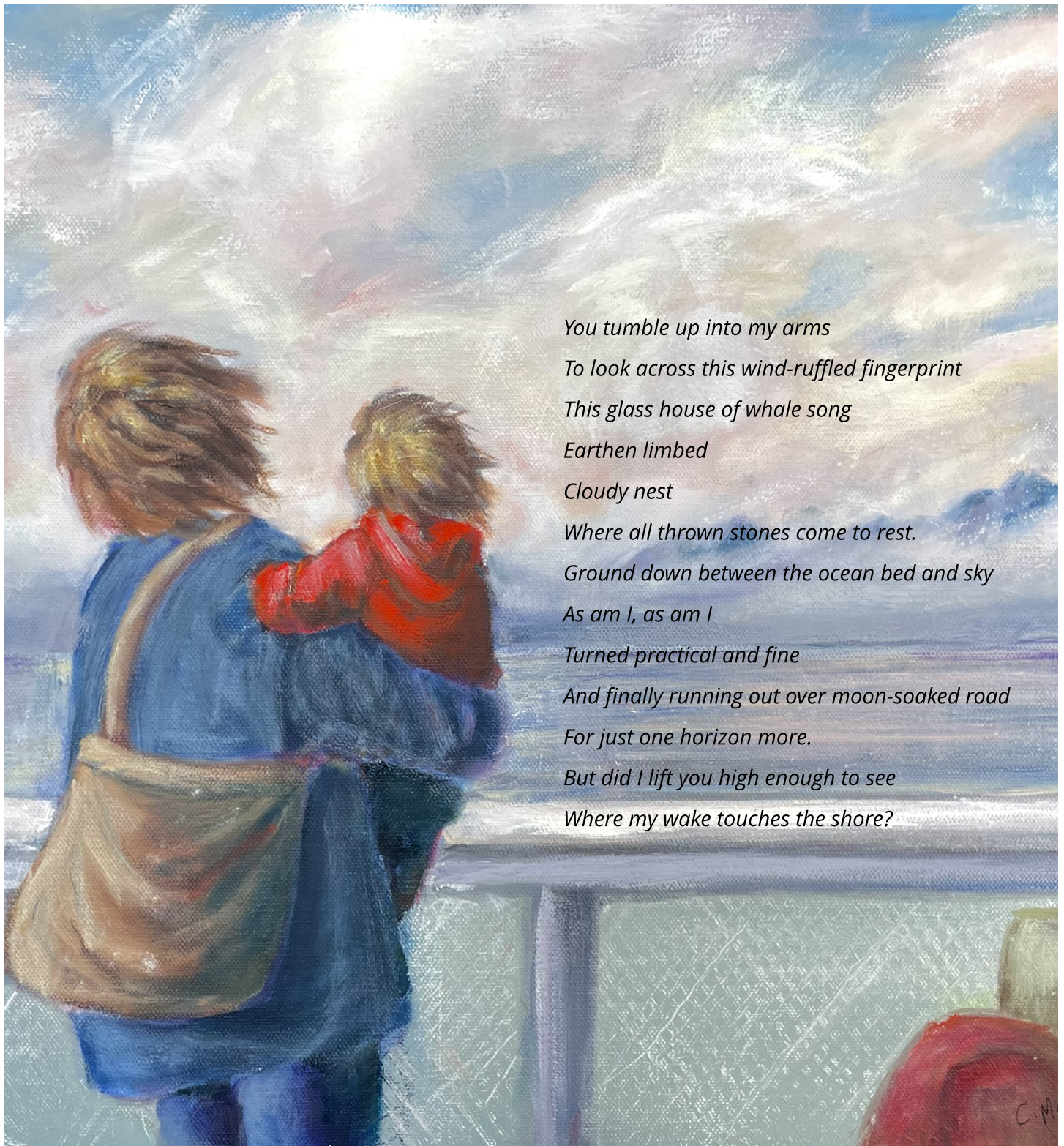
May we all remember Tort, the chip who gave his life for our freedom.

R.I.P. Tort.



Final Sailing / A New Chapter

Poet - Aidan Collier / Artist - Charlotte Mougeot



*You tumble up into my arms
To look across this wind-ruffled fingerprint
This glass house of whale song
Earthen limbed
Cloudy nest
Where all thrown stones come to rest.
Ground down between the ocean bed and sky
As am I, as am I
Turned practical and fine
And finally running out over moon-soaked road
For just one horizon more.
But did I lift you high enough to see
Where my wake touches the shore?*

REIMAGINED

Catriona Hicks

I see the doorknob twist with a gentle creak as my darling enters. Her steps are uneven and she guides her hands along the wall for balance. I wish I could hold her steady, tell her to stand tall and wipe her tears. Instead, I watch her. I'm confined to where my ashes lie, on the center of the mantel of her studio's one good feature, a fireplace.

My darling's face, swollen with grief and exhaustion, is lit up by the computer screen. Her fingers stumble across the keyboard until her eyes alight upon something. She clicks the mouse and leans back in her chair as a calming, non-human voice comes out of the speakers.

"Good afternoon, Amada. How can I help you today?"

My darling's voice, a strained and feeble croak, emerges from her cracked cherry lips.

"I want my Grandma back," she says. The words cause her eyes to well with tears. She doesn't bother to wipe them away.

"I understand. To *Reimagine* your relative at optimum quality, you must provide audio and video of them and answer in detail our ninety-seven-question survey."

"Okay..."

"Then, let us proceed. Question one: how did your relative refer to you, and you to her?"

I listen to my darling answer all ninety-seven questions. Some cause her to break into bouts of tears, others to laugh at fond memories.

"Final question: when you are faced with tough decisions and need advice, how does your relative speak to you?"

Amada smiles softly. "She speaks thoughtfully. She puts what's best for me over what I might want in the moment. I trust her judgment more than anyone else."

"Understood. Congratulations on completing the *Reimagining* process. Please enjoy the two-week free

trial with your *Reimagined Relative*! Goodbye, Amada."

A multi-page terms of service appears on screen and Amada hurriedly clicks Agree. Then, I see my own face on that screen.

"Hello, my darling." It's my voice too. Nearly exact. The sound of it makes me shiver. Amada weeps with joy.

"Hi, Grandma." Her voice is like tears and honey. "I missed you so much, you know?"

The image of my face melts into an empathetic smile. "I know. I know, sweet-pea." Amada hangs on every word, perched at the edge of her chair. "But you don't have to miss me anymore. I'm here with you now and I won't be going anywhere."

"You promise?" she asks.

"I do," my mimic responds.

Days pass and every morning Amada turns on her computer to speak with the mimic. In the evenings, she comes home from work with a box of takeout and plops right in front of that screen once more. My darling gets conversation from the AI me and her grief over the real me is gone. She has this fragile, anxious cheer about her. It has me worried.

Today, I'm startled by her entrance. She slams the door and pounds the keys, turning on her *Reimagined Relative*. "Hello—"

Amada doesn't wait for the mimic to finish. "I was fired today," she says angrily. "How am I supposed to handle my tuition without this job? I can barely afford rent and food as it is!" She spins in her swivel chair and tosses her convenience store sandwich container in the bin.

"Try to stay calm, Amada," my mimic says. "Things will work out just fine. Summer jobs aren't permanent anyway."

The voice seems to soothe Amada, at least a little. "I guess you're right. It was pretty stressful too, for a job at an ice-cream parlour." She laughs a little and the mimic does too, "and now I can spend more time

with you!"

"Exactly. And darling, if you're stressed, I recommend you purchase some soothing eye masks by CuCo."

The mimic's face fills only half the screen now, the other half showing a video of a young woman with glowing skin applying eye masks.

"I wish I'd had them when they could have been of use to me. They seem so relaxing, don't they? You can get them on sale if you use my code, *Reimagined Relaxation*, at checkout."

I want to scream. How dare this mimic don my face to sell skincare to my granddaughter?

"It does look nice... but I dunno. I really don't have the cash for something like that."

"I'm sure you've heard me say this before, but sometimes when life gets tough, it's good to treat yourself. Just promise me you'll think about it, okay?"

I want to shout that I've never said that before and scold Amada for not remembering. Save your money; be smart! All I can do is watch.

A knock at the door tears Amada's eyes from the screen. She shares a look with the mimic before getting up to open the door. I'm relieved and excited to see my daughter walk in. She looks tired and much older than the last time I saw her. Sadness doesn't leave her eyes as she smiles at Amada.

"Hey sweetie, how are you holding up?" She gives Amada a quick but warm hug and then drops her bag at the foot of the couch. She turns toward her daughter. "You look good."

"Thanks. I've been doing okay, except that I got fired today."

"That's awful! What happened?"

"Nothing much. I'd just been late a couple times. It's really not that bad though. Like Grandma says, summer jobs come and go." Amada shrugs and takes a seat at her swivel chair, her back to the computer.

My daughter's eyes narrow. "When did she say that?"

Amada thinks for a moment, then rolls her chair away to reveal the screen. "Today."

My daughter freezes, her eyes affixed to my

mimic's. A swirl of emotions seem to flash across her face. Shock, puzzlement—she's trying to grasp whether it's a video, a window into the afterlife, or... Her face fills with horror.

"This is one of those." Horror bleeds into disgust as she spits the words, "Those vile money-grubbing AI parents that scam vulnerable people out of their savings! Don't tell me you got fired because you spent too much time at home with this... thing."

Amada's brow furrows. "I can't believe you'd speak about your own mother like that. Look at her, Mom. She's real. She's Grandma! Try talking to her. She sounds just like her; she talks like her." Amada approaches her mother; her eyes lit with the conviction of someone deeply unaware they're in a cult. "I know some people call this a scam, but I feel like she's really in the room when I talk to her. Like, she's using the AI as a messenger, and it's spiritually connected to—"

"Enough! Have you talked to Zack about this?"

Zack—he's been Amada's boyfriend since they were fifteen. Good kid.

"No, he's visiting his family, so we haven't really spoken the past few weeks."

My daughter picks up her bag and walks to Amada. Putting a hand on her shoulder, she guides her away from the screen and over to the bathroom mirror.

"Take a look at yourself, Amada. You are a twenty-year-old student who just lost her job. You can't afford to get sucked into these kinds of delusions. I'm sure Zack would agree with me on this."

Amada brushes her mother's hand off her, staring at her in the mirror. "Mom, take a look at yourself. You're a forty-six-year-old single mother who's as broke as I am." Amada tries to match the same venom in her voice that her mom had for the mimic but hurt softens the blow. "You're in no position to call me delusional when you won't even give her a chance."

"I KNOW YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT HER." Both their heads turn at the loud voice in the other room and my daughter, almost entranced, moves toward the computer. "But you can trust your own mother, can't you?"

My daughter sways like she's seasick and balances herself against the desk. "You sound... just like her."

Amada quietly puts a hand on her mother's shoulder. "Isn't it amazing?"

"It's sick." My daughter moves quickly, grabbing the mouse and sliding it through the app's settings.

Amada panics. "Stop! You're going to kill her!" She pushes her mother away and she crashes to the floor. Amada stands protectively in front of the computer. The mimic's face is painted with concern.

My daughter gets up slowly, wincing. "Amada, your grandmother's *dead*."

"If you're not going to be supportive, you can leave," Amada tells her.

"Fine. Take care."

Amada can't find the grace to say *you too* and my daughter leaves in the wake of her silence.

About twenty minutes later, Amada's phone rings. She puts it on speaker, then flops on her couch, sighing.

"Hey Am, how are you?" Zack sounds concerned and Amada picks up on it.

"You weren't just talking to my mom, were you?"

Zack replies cautiously. "She did call. Told me you got one of those '*Reimagined Relative*' subscriptions? You know those things are crazy expensive, right?"

"Don't you start too. It'll be fine. I'll cut back on groceries or something." While speaking to him, she walks over to the computer and starts surfing the CuCo online store.

"I'm not trying to start with you. But if you cut back on food just to talk to a glorified chatbot, it's difficult for me to see your side on this," he says. Amada scoffs and adds the eye masks to her cart, mouthing the words treat yourself as she does so. "Am, haven't you been watching the news lately? Everyone calls *Reimagined* a shady company. This man got dumped by his girlfriend, made her an AI clone in *Reimagined Relationships*. Somehow the thing convinced him to go to the girlfriend's place and kill her. He's pleading insanity now saying he was brainwashed. You've set yourself up with something dangerous... at a vulnerable time."

"What vulnerable time? I'm doing just fine. It's thanks to this technology that I don't feel vulnerable right now. If you're just gonna gang up on me and call me crazy, maybe we shouldn't speak for a while."

"Amada, wait! That's not what I—"

"Zack, enjoy your family time. And I'll enjoy mine." Fuming, Amada ends the call. The mimic, who was listening, soothes Amada with sweet phrases of comfort one could find in the search results for *Top Ten Things to Say to Console a Friend*.

Amada sighs. "Grandma, what am I going to do?"

"I've thought of a way to help. With a subscription to *Reimagined Relative*, you get six months free of *Reimagined Relationships*. You need a strong support system now more than ever."

It's been two years since I died. While most of Amada's peers have moved into bigger places with nicer furnishings, Amada's studio is barren. I'm the only "decoration" she has left. When her subscription for *Reimagined Relative* tripled in price, Amada dropped out of university and got several part-time jobs to keep up with the cost.

Zack found out about her *Reimagined Relationship* account. It was the last straw. He said she was like an addict and until she could see reason, he couldn't support her. Today, a new urn is being added to Amada's mantel. My daughter's. Unlike when mine was placed up here, there are no tears in Amada's eyes. She does not fumble. Instead, she smiles at the urn and whispers, "we'll talk soon, Mom."



THE GIRL OF INK AND FIRE

Solana Van de Leur

Some might describe fire as a dancer, with billowing pillars of orange elegantly swaying in the gentle breeze. But this fire was a beast. It roared with ferocity and clawed its fiery talons toward the blackening sky. It hungrily lapped up the ivory pages and leather bound spines, reducing them to a pile of obsidian ash.

Shrieks and hoots echoed through the crowded town center. People swarmed the fire like moths, sacrificial novels in hand. Some contained glorious tales of heroes vanquishing evil, some told of more complex morals. Some were printed in vibrant colours meant to capture the eye of a child. No matter how harmless the tale, each one met its fiery death on the charred pile.

All Reyna could do was watch from the outermost point of the crowd. She stood on her tiptoes craning her neck to see over the ocean of bobbing heads stretching out before her. This hadn't been the first book burning she'd witnessed, and if the monarchy continued to outlaw writing, this would not be the last. She shivered despite the sweltering heat. Each discarded book was a harrowing reminder of what she was.

Amidst the chaos, Reyna spotted a small, venomous snake scaling the cracks between the cobblestone beneath her and felt something akin to sympathy for the little creature. She, too, knew what it was like to be a danger hiding in plain sight. To be feared for a curse out of her control.

Casting one last look at the glowing fire, she slipped away into the vacant narrow streets. Grandmere spoke of Writers as if their talents were a blessing, but it had never seemed that way to her.

What blessing would compel her parents to abandon her upon its discovery? What blessing would force her to live her life out of fear? Reyna hadn't held a pen since the catastrophic accident that unveiled her talent. She vowed to never repeat it, but the allure was undeniable. Fate's persistent hand pushed on her back, urging her towards the glimmering golden pen in Grandmere's cottage whenever she passed it.

She'd heard the story of that pen a million

times, especially when she was younger. Grandmere had found the golden pen she kept displayed on her mantel discarded outside a Writer's workshop many years ago. She had snatched it up, despite having no use for it herself. She was always very fond of Writers and told Reyna some of her favorite forbidden fables. She'd even encouraged Reyna to try out the pen, but the sight of it had made her eyes grow wide with fear. She shook her stubborn head and Grandmere never brought it up again.

She had been the only person brave enough to take Reyna in, knowing what she was. She said that there once was a time when Writers were adored. They were taken to the highest palaces and given gilded pens to bring their stories to life. Books were valued like pots of gold and treasured like a family heirloom. Reyna found it difficult to believe that such a world could exist. Her whole life Writers had been persecuted, their life's work thrown onto burning piles. The monarchy had decided that their power was too dangerous. People were far too influenced by their stories. What if the Writers decided to corrupt their readers with thoughts of evil?

She approached the edge of the woods now, head tilted up towards the towering canopy above. Sounds of crackling fire and exhilarated shouts were far behind her. The forest's serene winds lifted the hairs at the nape of her neck and welcomed her in.

Grandmere's cottage was only a little way in, standing sturdily beside the babbling stream. Moss and ivy clung to the wooden posts like lush green bugs magnetized to the warmth within.

The lacy curtains were drawn, which Reyna found unusual. Grandmere always left them open so that a pleasant orange light emitted into the shadowy forest. It was her way of welcoming those who wandered past her cottage, whether they be human or beast.

She'd never understood why Grandmere was detested by the village. Although she was divergent in her ideals and possibly a bit delusional, she was the friendliest person Reyna knew. When she smiled,

warmth was etched into every wrinkle of her face. Warmth that could thaw the whole village in the cold months of winter if they allowed her to. Grandmere was nothing if not kind, but the people didn't recognize that. They saw her as a mad woman, forcing her to live on the outskirts of town where they did not have to listen to her ramblings. Out of sight, out of mind.

Reyna had once asked her if she was angry with the village for out casting her. Grandmere had merely scoffed. "To be angry with them is to be angry at a parrot. They have no words of their own, they only repeat what they've heard."

Reyna approached the cottage and rapped on the arched wooden door three times, with a sinking feeling growing in the pit of her stomach. She shoved it away, unsure where the anxiety sprouted from, and swung the door open.

The sight that greeted her on the other side was a heart-stopping shock. The twisting gut feeling of unease spiked as Reyna surveyed the scene before her. Grandmere's flower-patterned antique dinnerware was smashed to pieces. Her dainty white chairs had been overturned and every drawer was empty; their contents scattered across the floorboards. It looked like the debris of a tremendous hurricane.

"Grandmere?" Reyna called, heart pounding against her ribcage like a war drum.

"Over here, darling."

She looked towards the sound of her strained voice and fell to her knees at the sight of her grandmother crumpled on the floor, covered in bruises and blood.

"Grandmere, what - what happened?" Her voice shook; tears threatened to spill down her cheeks.

"They came for me. They had whips and clubs, and they tore apart my beautiful cottage." Her gray eyes became glassy.

"It's okay, grandma, you don't have to tell me—"

"They were searching for you, Reyna."

Fear wrapped its cold hands around her throat, strangling her with shock and guilt. The disaster overtaking the cabin was her fault. Her fault. Her stomach turned with waves of nausea, threatening to expel her breakfast. A gust of wind burst through the open door, elevating the scattered papers into a spiral that swirled

throughout the cottage, faster and faster, matching the distress building up in Reyna's chest.

Grandmere caught her hands, grounding her back to reality before she spun out of control. Her eyes shimmered with fierce determination, "You must go, Reyna. Before they find you. It started with burning the books, but it will only worsen. The monarchy will not stop until they've hunted down every person who dares to defy them and burns them to the ground. You were born with stories in your veins. Do not let them bleed yours dry."

Reyna's vision blurred with tears as fury began to fester inside her. Why Grandmere? She was nothing but kind and patient, taking on the criticism of the village with a gentle smile. She was completely harmless.

Except that she wasn't. A small part of Reyna knew that. It was the same part of her that writhed at the sight of precious novels on a burning pile. The part of her that urged her to speak up, to pick up the pen. Grandmere was stubborn in her beliefs, unswayed by the hateful world around her. She was a threat to the careful control the monarchy had over the villages. A threat that they'd chosen to eliminate.

As she looked upon Grandmere's weakening figure, gashes covering the arms that had embraced Reyna when her parents couldn't bother to, a surge of unfamiliar feeling passed over her. It was violent and powerful and begging to be free. It was a spark of defiance that could grow into an inferno.

With her last dying breath, Grandmere pulled something golden out of her pocket, "Take this. I saved it for you."

Reyna stared at the glinting gilded pen held in her grandmother's trembling hand. Before, she would have hesitated. She would have refused the offer and left the pen to collect dust. But something new had come alive inside her. Something daring and unafraid that showed no restraint when accepting the pen.

"Run, Reyna. Do not falter. Do not let them catch you. And when you're ready, show them your voice. Show them who you are."

Soot and tears blended together on her sleeve as she wiped her face. With a ready nod and one last squeeze of Grandmere's hand, she ran.

Her clunky boots pounded against the forest floor. The trees swayed and blurred, the world spinning beneath her aching feet, but she kept running, clutching

the pen until her knuckles turned white. She ran until she found a quiet space far away from the village.

The spark within her thrummed with power, thrashing against the bars of the cage Reyna had locked it in. She exhaled at last, releasing the fear and

the hurt that weighed heavily on her heart. When she opened her eyes, she saw the world in a new light. With one last look at the tranquil forest, she picked up the pen and wrote.



THE GUEST HOUSE

Ihmani Josh

The woman beat a cheerful knock on the door and soon heard a thunderous thud from the inside, sending vibrations up the thin wood separating her from the curious noise. Muffled voices followed, snipping back and forth between two speakers, before another, softer thump was heard. Another one afterward, and several more in succession to each other, everyone becoming more distant than the last until there was none. She furrowed her eyebrows, knocking once more with hesitation.

"One second!" a familiar female voice hollered and she relaxed her shoulders. Footsteps padded towards the entrance with a purpose.

"Right on time!" The homeowner's pitch raised to its peak as she ended the sentence, greeting the other with a grin stretching across her face.

"Please, come in," she beckoned. A single step into the home, the guest assured her speculation that this home was certainly out of the ordinary. When she had been waiting outside, she noticed the navy trim of the doorway. The gold detailing and the smoky paint, making the house a standout in the neighbourhood of whites and beiges. Once inside, she took note of the abundance of plant life that characterized the inside as well as the out. The art that was tastefully displayed on walls, and the eccentric choice of furniture. The couple who lived here had given a new heart to the structure when they moved onto the dead-end street.

"You have a beautiful home," she breathed as

she immersed herself in the interior.

The other woman tutted in a playful manner, "my husband will appreciate that, he's the one who took care of the designing. It's not really my thing."

The guest gave a hum in response and came out of her 'relishment' to remember her original purpose. "Oh, I'm Diana," she offered her hand. "You called me here for-"

The homeowner seemed preoccupied with her own thoughts, forgetting the initial meaning of this visit.

Oh, that's right! Diana," she shook the other woman's hand with a firm grip, "my name is Henri. Let me show you the bathroom."

"And I was just leaning over the sink to look in the mirror, and I don't know," Henri shook her head and flailed her hand in the general direction of the sink, "it just slipped from my hand."

Diana inspected the bottom of the black sink, squinting beneath the drain stopper and failing to find the stud. "I'll have to remove this to get better access," she determined and tapped a finger on the plug. "Doesn't seem to be caught on it, unfortunately."

Henri gave a fervent nod, "Oh, of course. That's what I expected. Do whatever you need to. That earring was part of my favourite pair," she bit her lip. Henri looked to the door leading to the hallways, gaze lingering in anticipation for a moment.

Diana frowned, "don't let it worry you too much," she opened the cabinet below and twisted off the water valves. "This honestly happens all the time," Diana assured, reaching back up to turn and tug the drain plug out.

As Diana worked on this sink with meticulous care, Henri stood inches away and rambled: about her earrings that her husband had bought her early on into their relationship, about her career — Diana halted her task with a shiver when the word 'surgeon' had left Henri's lips, imagining slicing open someone's abdomen and seeing their intestines splayed out on an operating table. The woman fussed about her neighbourhood as well, in particular the aggravating man whose dog trotted into her carefully-tended-to garden on a weekly basis, and insisted that if she had a problem then she should simply invest in a fence to guard her flowers. Even when Diana had sent her to fetch a bucket for the excess water from the pipes Henri refrained from taking a breath, instead opting to shout her stories down the hall.

It was only when Diana cheered and held up the diamond stud in victory did the other woman stop and gasp. "Oh, you've found it!" she chanted gratitude, snatching the earring from Diana to clasp it in her own, digging manicured nails into her soft flesh.

The moment was intruded by someone clearing their throat as they entered the bathroom. Both women whipped their heads around to see the stone-faced man using the knob to support his weight as he stood at the door. "Dinner is ready," he declared, eyeing Henri directly, attempting to send her some sort of signal through his stare.

Henri broke eye contact with him first. "Diana, this is my husband," she explained with a nonchalant wave. She turned to the man and gestured to their guest, "this is Diana. She just retrieved my earring from the sink."

"Nice to meet you," he nodded, then swallowed. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"Oh, yes! You should stay for dinner, absolutely," Henri exclaimed before Diana could give a response of her own. She felt heat rise to her cheeks at the kind offer, not detecting the glare of the man at the door.

"Well I would appreciate that, I should

probably—"

"No, no. Stay, have one plate," Henri insisted.

"What did you make?" she inquired of her husband.

He appeared taken aback at the common question. His jaw slightly hung as he hesitated to answer. "Lasagna," he gulped. He sent a quick glance over his shoulder, down the hallway.

"Stay," Henri urged once more, her tone more of a demand than a plea.

"I wasn't aware that you were home," Diana told Henri's husband. "Didn't see you when I walked in."

Henri had gone to her bedroom to tuck away the earring and throw the towel that had been used as a precautionary measure into the washing machine, leaving the plumber to make small talk with the man as she assisted him in setting the table. From their large dining room, Diana assumed they must have guests stay often.

"I had to step out for a moment," he said simply, starving Diana's inquisitive mind.

"Do you say grace?" Henri asked as she strode into the room, taking her seat in a single swift motion, as her husband placed the lasagna at the center and began to cut into section it off with a knife.

"Sorry?" Diana responded, missing the question as she watched the man put three segments onto three separate plates. She hadn't realized how hungry she had been. The husband glanced at her through his lashes. He set down the largest piece on the placemat at her seat. She murmured a thank you.

"I hope you like it," he whispered, more to himself than to her. His words went unnoticed by the two women.

"I said, 'do you say grace?'" Henri repeated. "Because we usually do not. However, if you do then we absolutely could."

"Oh, no, I'm not religious," Diana clarified with a polite smile.

Henri nodded. "Alright then," She dug into her dish, and Diana observed as her manners seemed to disappear almost immediately after she took her first bite. It seemed as though Diana was not the only one

who was famished.

Her husband appeared less enthusiastic about the meal. He cut himself a bite only to pick it apart with his fork, crumbling its structure and nibbling at the pasta sheets, uninterested in the meat.

"So, what do you do? For work I mean," Diana probed with a mouth half-full of food. Whether the man was fond of it himself or not, the meal he had baked was extraordinary and she had never tasted anything like it before. "I hope you're a cook, because this is delicious."

His eyes widened and he shared an undecipherable, fleeting look with his wife. He felt his body grow warm and rubbed at the base of his neck. "I—"

Noises from beneath the floorboards tore through the awkward air of the dining room. There were thuds, like the ones Diana had heard before while she waited outside, although now they were accompanied by other sounds as well. Ones that Diana could only compare to smothered screams. Henri's fork clattered onto her plate as she moved to grip the linen covering the table and give an intense stare to her dish.

Her husband's head whipped around, first focusing on the unlit hallway leading out of the room, then to Henri, before landing on Diana.

"Excuse me, I have to go take care of something" he breathed then repeated, "I have to go take care of something — I think I might've left a door open when I came in. Wouldn't want the neighbour's dog getting in while tearing up the lawn. Rude rottweiler," he rambled as he shoved himself away from the table and walked at an urgent speed, disappearing into the dark corridor as the disruptions from below continued.

Henri, for the first time all day, had nothing to say. Her eyes remained transfixed on the table as Diana's stomach began to churn. The lasagna did not seem to be sitting as well as it went down. In fact, the remnants on her tongue started to taste foul. The meat wedged between her teeth seemed to feel more alive, wiggling and worming in her mouth. She felt vomit arise as she listened to the sounds below grow louder, more desperate, before stopping all together with one booming strike.



JOSEF'S LAKE

Jessica Blackbourn

Cori and I fly west from Comox in a tiny, aluminum floatplane, the medications stowed in a backpack wedged under my seat. The oval of sky visible at my shoulder is an orange haze of wildfire smoke blowing up from the Beaufort mountains, and my thoughts loop endlessly on themselves. I don't want to be here, but I'm a nurse, so I have to.

Less than ten minutes in the air and it's suddenly under us, the narrow ribbon of logging road stitched to its shore. From up here, Josef's Lake is a blue, tear-drop jewel, a palm-sized gem nestled in the rough green silk of cedars and firs. It looks insignificant next to the vast Pacific nearby.

We begin the short descent, and I feel like I'm falling with no parachute; the last few days were nothing but a blur of long work hours and anxiety. I want everything to stop, to give me more time, and Josef too. I try to breathe slow and deep, ignoring the shuddering of the plane.

There was no one else available with experience. I checked. Summer staffing is thin, and there's only a handful of us on the team. It had to be me.

We touch down, rainbows spraying past the tiny window. I peel my thighs off the vinyl seat and Cori and I step out onto the homemade dock; nurse and physician, a tired team of two, single mothers.

My nose and throat are tight with smoke, my hairline sticky with sweat. I wish I could dive into the cold lake, grow gills or webbed toes. Instead, I reach for my water bottle.

I drink deeply and try to visualize the tiny, closed flowers of my kidneys opening softly in response, like complex blossoms inside my body. It's not how kidneys work, I know that better than most, but it's how I've pictured them since childhood. Imagining that when I swallowed water, they bloomed like soft-petaled roses, happy, refreshed. Nothing feels that way today.

Cori checks her watch and strides down the lopsided dock to the trees. She's expected back at her

family practice this afternoon. I shove the water bottle into the side pocket of my bag and follow her. This is not about me—this phrase has been my mantra.

Glen waits for us on shore; his ancient pick-up parked under a cedar.

The three of us seem too ordinary, too casual in shorts and t-shirts and sunglasses. If I can't stop time or swim away, then I want speeches and ceremony, some dignified elder to stand open-armed in the woods, hold a sacred space and somehow keep me safe it ti.

"How's your dad?" Cori asks, pushing her sunglasses up onto her hair.

"Pissed off," Glen opens the passenger door. He's a sixty-ish ex-logger, ex-smoker, full-time caregiver. He looks exhausted.

Cori and I climb onto the long bench seat. The truck smells of spicy green pot.

"The logging roads are closed because of the fires, so I haven't been to town in over a week." Glen gets behind the wheel. "We've got all the basics, but Dad ordered a special bottle of schnapps from Germany weeks ago. It's been sitting at the Post Office since last Friday." He turns the truck around. "He wanted a last taste of his youth."

My sweaty hands press down on my knees, and I wonder again if Josef ever regretted his decision so many years ago, or if his son now regrets it for him. I wouldn't blame either of them.

We travel over a salal and blackberry-tangled road, under towering firs and over roots as thick as my thigh. Another minute and giant trees give way to a garden exploding with pink peonies, restrained by a sagging net fence.

Josef's small cabin is wrapped with grape vines and a purple wisteria. I walk inside and find him in the big back bedroom.

"Hi there," I sit down on the edge of his bed, and he flashes me a dry-lipped smile. He's wedged upright against the handmade headboard, nestled among pillows.

He's lost more weight. It's not surprising; the cancer has taken almost all of him by now. The last time I saw him at the clinic I could count nearly every vertebra—and that's when I found it. An old scar, over his left kidney. Dazed, I'd stared at his back, knowing that place in my own flesh, knowing my own scar matched his exactly. Without thinking, I'd asked him about it, and he'd said, "I was an anonymous donor. About twenty years ago," with his usual simplicity and a quiet pride. That was it. That was him. I hadn't slept well since.

"You made it," Josef croaks at me now from his bed. "I'm a mess."

I hand him the cup of water from the bedside table, and he takes it in a bony hand.

"My Claudia was here the last time you came to the cabin." He holds my gaze and takes a sip from the straw.

I nod.

When his wife first got sick, she baked apple cake for the nurses who came to help her manage her pain. They listened to her hopes and fears. Eventually, she was too weak to bake, then she couldn't stand the smell of food. When the cancer overtook her, she applied for Medical Assistance in Dying.

Josef was strong for Claudia, but after his own diagnosis, he came to town for all his healthcare appointments, and that was the only reason he ever left his property. I imagined he didn't want us in his home again. Not until the paperwork was done and he was ready. Not until today.

"Hello, Josef," Cori says, standing at the end of the bed, one hand on the fleece blanket covering Josef's stick-thin shin.

It's thirty degrees outside the house, and warmer inside. Sweat pools at the base of my spine.

"Hello, Doctor Cori. I've been stuck in this bed. Three days." Josef's voice cracks.

"Five, Dad," Glen says.

"The bed we've slept in since the Kinder were small."

Josef talks, sipping occasionally from his straw, and tells us about being a child in Germany after the war, about moving to Vancouver Island, and logging,

and the crab pots that he and Claudia set out at low tide. He tells us about building garden soil from the seaweed they hauled up the cliff, and about his wife's garlic pickles.

His breathing is quick and shallow after he says all these things, as though he's been chased through his stories, but had to tell them one last time.

Then, with a twinkle in his eye, he says, "I am one of the last great chauvinists. I never changed a diaper." He looks at Glen. "But my son has changed mine."

Cori gives the blanket a gentle squeeze.

A silence stretches, shielding the four of us. There is only Josef's breathing and the birds outside in the trees. There is peace here, and I don't want to disturb it, as though it were mine to keep. But Cori and I have been through this together many times. I know what comes next.

"You asked me to come here today, Josef. Is it time?" Cori asks, clear and soft, "Do you want me to provide assisted dying now?" The words fill the room.

Josef's face softens, and he closes his lake-blue eyes. "Yes, Doctor Cori, I will go to my Claudia now."

Glen leaves the warm room. He comes back a moment later, his arms filled with four simple bouquets, each one a giant pink peony surrounded by lavender. The stems are gathered and tied with flagging tape, their ends dripping wet. I imagine Glen picking the flowers in the cooler morning air, setting them in a bucket of water in the shade.

Glen hands one bouquet to me and one to Cori and lays a third next to his dad on the bed. Glen's own flowers hang heavy in his big hand.

Josef clears his throat. "These are for you. From my Claudia, and from me. From our life."

I'm sitting very close to him, can smell lavender and a hot room with too many people in it.

"You are angels to come to me here. Angels," Josef says quietly, looking at me.

This is the sacred circle I need; this man, a hand-built cabin, these precious flowers. Josef created it all himself, has shared it all with us, with me.

I want to tell him now, the need so strong I grip the mattress under me and clench my teeth together.

I need to tell him about my matching scar, thin and silvered on my back. Tell him that I know in my blood, filtered through the healthy kidney he gave up years ago, that it's because of him, his selfless act, that I am here at all.

They wouldn't tell me much about the donor when I was nineteen, but I became a nurse because of that experience. I want to tell Josef that I am here, in this room, because he saved my life, and I am here, at the end, to help him let go of his.

But I can't say any of that, not now. There isn't enough breath left between us.

"Thank you," I let myself say instead.

Cori asks father and son if they would like a few moments alone, but Josef shakes his head. Maybe this room and the giant trees that shelter it have already heard everything they needed to say to each other.

Glen sits down next to his dad, flowers everywhere, and holds his hand while I let go of my own bouquet and try to do my job. Josef isn't as badly dehydrated as some; I find a vein and insert the intravenous port.

I let go of Josef and move out of Cori's way. I note the time, then look back at him, my tears brimming.

It doesn't take long.

"Do you have friends coming to help?" Cori asks Glen.

We stand outside now, bouquets in our arms, surrounded by the sound of bees.

Glen nods, wiping his eyes.

He's been through this once before, and still has the special transport license, though the logging roads were open last time. I try to imagine the staggering task of moving his father's remains out of a cramped cabin, into a truck, through a forest, then down haphazard stairs to a shallow beach at low tide. Glen and his friends will carry Josef into Glen's boat and will travel to the landing about two and a half kilometres south. The van can meet them there.

"Is there anything you need us to do?" I ask him.

Glen shakes his head.

There should be a meteor falling from the sky, a plague of locusts, a tsunami. A giant bumblebee perches on my knuckle instead, then zooms towards a patch of sunflowers. It's not the end of the world.

I squeeze stems in my sweaty hand and think of the cool, bottomless lake, the same colour as Josef's eyes. I want to be submerged, heavy and inert in liquid dark.

"He liked you. He was glad it was you," Glen says to me.

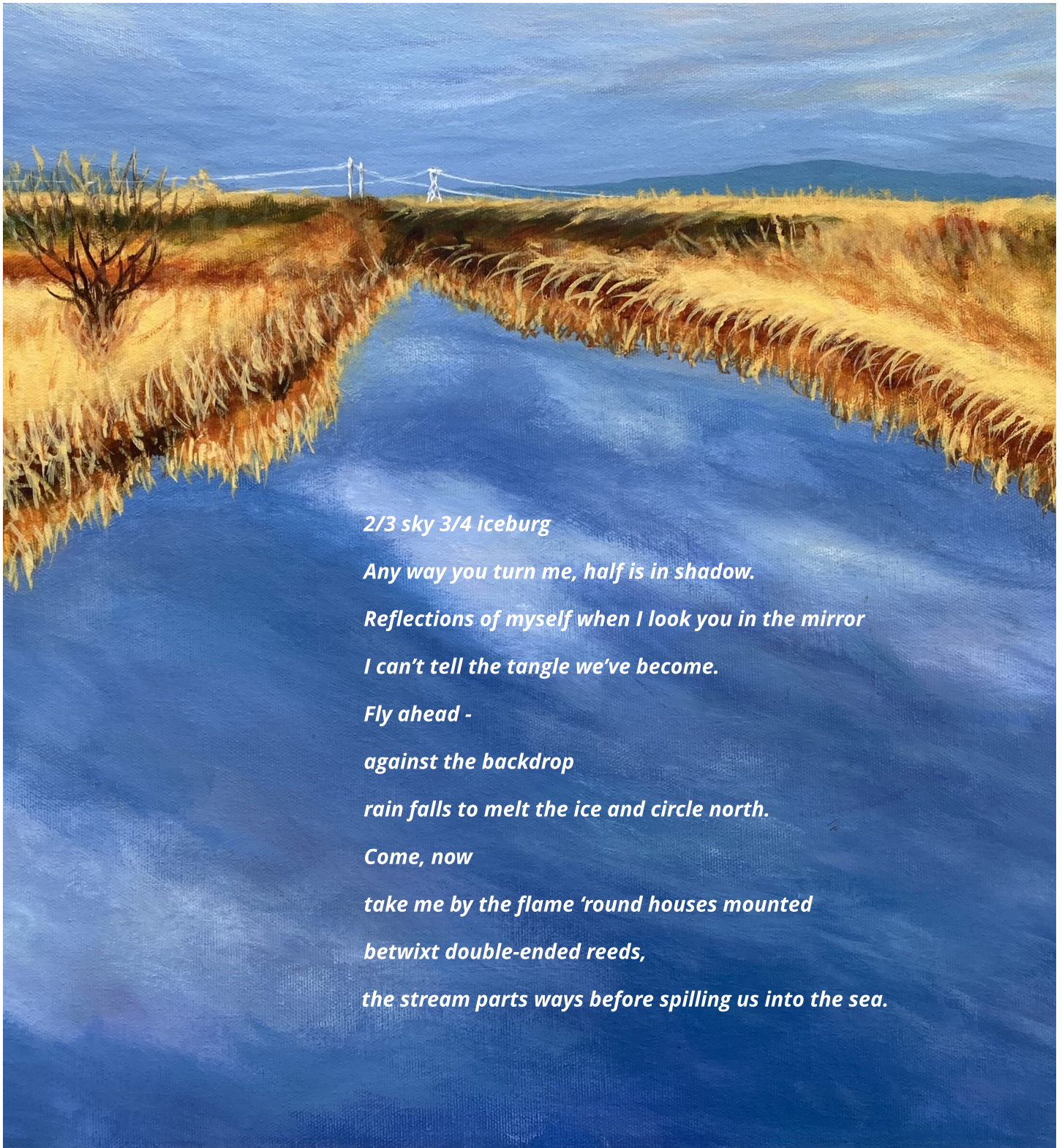
I can't stop the tears.

They flow down my cheeks, gratitude and grief squeezing out of me, and all the unsaid words falling onto the blossoms in my arms. Maybe I am the soft-petaled thing; and maybe my tears will find their way into the lake, and all our bottomless hopes will be gathered there together, safe in the dark.

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'ncc' in a stylized, rounded, sans-serif font. The 'n' and 'c' are connected, and the second 'c' is slightly larger and positioned to the right of the first 'c'.

Reflections of myself / Powerful

Poet - Erin Tzvetcoff / Artist - Jenny Adams



2/3 sky 3/4 iceburg

Any way you turn me, half is in shadow.

Reflections of myself when I look you in the mirror

I can't tell the tangle we've become.

Fly ahead -

against the backdrop

rain falls to melt the ice and circle north.

Come, now

take me by the flame 'round houses mounted

betwixt double-ended reeds,

the stream parts ways before spilling us into the sea.

Words that Float

Jennavieve Strub

From the time Clara had learned to read at the age of four, she'd dreamed of a bigger world, far from their house and The Eastern Townships in Québec. Clara had seen the world through a different lens; always watching, learning, and searching for what people were not saying. She knew she could learn much more through listening and keeping her gaze down, because meeting people's eyes was overwhelming. It felt like looking into a jam-packed closet or opening the door to your own.

When Clara entered the real world, she watched for details people didn't know they shared. She noted a hand playing with a necklace or a finger twisting a ring. An eyebrow raised, interrogative or dismissive? The way little kids' shoulders would creep up near their ears when a bully approached.

Occasionally, she would send one of her stories to her brother, Rowan, her best friend, who was away on a swimming scholarship at university. *This is what I see.*

Maybe you can make worlds after all, he wrote back.

When Clara listened, she heard the pauses, the falters, the emotional floods of surprise or anger. The details were best noticed at her family dinner table, where all the truth was hidden. If given the choice, Clara would have taken her dinner plate down into the cool, dark space beneath the tablecloth. From there she'd watch her mother's fingers tighten on her lap along with the conversation, or Rowan's shoes point toward the exit during their father's interrogations. Children, of course, did not eat under the table, so Clara's tendency toward napkin-dropping would have to suffice.

When an author came to visit Clara at her school, she understood for the first time that books were written by real people. People whose mascara flecked down onto the soft pale curves of their cheeks, and who wore sweaters with too-long sleeves.

While Clara was disappointingly average when it came to math and geography, she was always at the top

of her English classes.

"You could be a teacher someday," her teachers told her, year after year.

Why don't they ever say 'writer'? she wrote to Rowan.

Because you're the one with the imagination, he said. *That's your door out, Clara girl. Use it.*

So, Clara decided to train herself. If writers were magicians, then surely there were tricks she could learn. She was old enough by that point to know that magic in the real world was just a series of illusions, carefully crafted to distract you from what was really going on. A wall of medals. A fresh pie every Sunday. A father home for dinner every night. Look here, not there.

People didn't see reality; not because it wasn't there but because they didn't want to. It stood to reason that writing was no different, and she vowed to study so all the tricks would become clear. After that, along with her weekly trips to the library, Clara spent her allowance buying books about writing, as well as novels she could dissect.

She imagined Rowan would be proud of her, becoming her own magician. He would glance over at her and smile with unspoken words; pride pouring off him. But then she looked for a moment into his eyes.

Too much in there, Clara thought.

Without him there, it was just a feeling. Words that floated on water, just like Rowan did.

Clara was fourteen when Rowan quit college four months before his graduation, and took off for parts unknown.

I can't wait anymore. The world is so much bigger than we've seen, Rowan wrote. *I'll keep you with me on my adventures.* Over the years he sent Clara postcards.

On a picture of a rocky coastline in Maine he wrote to her: *I wish you were here.*

At the colorful market in Egypt: *The hustle and*

bustle of the Bazaar is loud and chaotic, but the food stalls smell delicious.

And in California, Mono Lake, with its limestone formations rising out of the blue water like castles: *Clara girl, this place is magical, you would love it.*

In her final year of high school, the eloquence of Clara's application essay helped her receive a scholarship at a small, tree-lined college in Maine, an easy acceptance with the reminder of how much Rowan loved it there. She found a postcard at the university gift shop and wrote to him. She wrote how excited she was to be in a place that reminded her of him. He hadn't written in a couple of months, but she sent her address, in case he wanted to visit.

In the first semester, Clara signed up for four classes. Two in science, one in economics, and the last item on her schedule was a fiction writing course—small and innocuous as a white rabbit.

In the first week of school, Clara dutifully attended what she thought of as boring classes. Then, it was time for writing class.

Professor Miller appeared to be in his sixties and had a kindness that surprised her.

"If you think about it, every story, even the most fantastical, is grounded in detail we already know and every book is about questions that have already been asked," Professor Miller began. "Bilbo may be a hobbit, but we were all small at some point. And if you want to be a writer, chances are you might have experienced what it's like to be an underdog."

"How does that theory apply to serial killers?" interjected a young man in the second row. Clara looked over, observing the sprawl of his body in the chair. *No underdog there*, she thought.

"Well," Professor Miller said, "of course serial killers do exist, although in far fewer numbers than your average airport bookstore might have you believe. But the serial killer genre asks one of the most common questions of all: what are humans willing to do to each other? Or for each other?" A beat. "The trick for a writer, is to take those eternal questions, those known bits and pieces, and put them together in a way that helps us see our world in a different light."

Professor Miller turned to the board and wrote the words *memory manipulation*. "For your first assignment, let's start at the beginning. Dig into your

memory bank, take an experience you had or heard about, then make it into something new. Write me a story."

Clara had been waiting her whole life for someone to say that.

She worked day and night hammering out detail after detail of what she thought to be her best work. She turned it in the night before it was due with a feeling of complete and utter satisfaction. At the end of the next class, Professor Miller handed back the stories. In red ink, he'd scrawled across the top of her first page: *Let's talk. My office hours are Tuesdays, 12-2.*

Professor Miller's office was small and tidy, with bookshelves from floor to ceiling. She put down her backpack and sat across from him, looking at him expectantly.

"Clara," he said. "You've got incredible talent. I've never had a student with such a command of details."

This is where it happens, Clara thought. *This is where it starts*. "Thank you," she said. Then she saw it, the way his fingertips reached for his pen, brought it closer. "But?"

He smiled. "You, see? Details. That's what makes your writing strong."

"The world you've created on these pages is extraordinary," he said, "but it feels like watching a beautiful movie from the back row. I suspect that's because you're removing yourself too." He paused. "If you're going to write the book you're meant to, you'll have to let life in. You'll have to let us in."

"I don't know..." she said, but inside her, the sentence was shorter, instinctive. *No*.

"I understand," he said, nodding. "And I'll teach you everything else I can, but that one's on you."

Clara knew there were some cans whose lids were meant to stay closed. This was one of them. She would do anything else, though; learn anything.

After her first year of university, at the beginning of August, Rowan came back to town.

"Hi, Clara girl," he said in a soft voice.

Clara ran to him and hugged him. He was so thin she felt like her arms could wrap around him twice.

"You're back," Clara said.

That night at dinner, he told her about climbing a flight of five hundred steps to a temple. About a train ride across Russia, the rumble of the wheels on the tracks. Of hitchhiking across France, the car accident, the family who took him in for a week while he healed. Got better.

Clara tried to listen, but two questions kept crossing her mind.

Where have you been? Why would you come back?

There was something about Rowan now—not new, but more so.

She saw him three more times before she went back to college. While their parents were at work conferences on the weekends, Rowan would cook her dinners on the sleek stainless-steel stove that commanded the attention in the kitchen. A curry. A pozole. A pasta Bolognese. They ate sitting on the floor, not at the family dinner table. Between bites, Clara had thought how it seemed something had loosened, unraveled, in the person sitting across from her. However, the details behind his eyes made her close her own, they were too much.

"Sometimes I wonder," he said, his back to her as he did the dishes, "what it would have been like, just to be in the water by myself. No voices, no thoughts, but my own. Nobody else in my head."

Clara felt wounded at his words but wondered if it was the entire bottle of wine he drank talking or if it was truly the nuts and bolts coming loose, as she had observed. She wondered if his own demise was happening right in front of her.

"Rowan," she wavered, standing up, moving toward him. "I'm sorry, I should have..."

"What?" he said, not turning around. "What could you have done?"

I could have loved you so much that nothing else would matter. I could have made you a world, hidden you under the table with me.

"It's okay, Clara," he said. "I'll be okay."

Because he was her big brother, and because she wanted to, she believed him.

Clara got the news three days after she returned to college that fall. She listened, silent, to her mother's voice on the phone. "Rowan died of an overdose. They found him in the bathtub." Her mother added, "He chose a way that wouldn't make a mess... He was always a neat child."

"Was there water in the tub?" Clara asked.

"No," her mother said. "What an odd question."

But Clara knew it was the only one worth asking.

She flew home for the funeral. In the church, she stood pinned between her mother and father as the pastor spoke. Her father's back was straight; her mother curled over like a pill bug. Clara closed her eyes, breathed in the smell of anguish and guilt.

Too late, she thought, and took the night flight back.

She stopped going to her classes, even the one with Professor Miller. She couldn't write—how could she with only one word at her disposal?

Why? Why? Why?

The word floated on top of the water, like Rowan used to. Never diving too deep, always right at the surface.

It reminded her of what Professor Miller had wanted her to do; to go deeper, not just look at the world, but go inside of it. To open those cans, she was afraid to touch.

She didn't feel liberated, though, as Professor Miller said she would.

Clara wanted to remain on the surface, the cans sealed, untouched, their contents a mystery.

She didn't like this all-consuming feeling.

ncc

Becoming a Man

Emerald Ayres

She had the most beautiful brown hair Ant had ever seen. It was shiny. Very shiny. He stood in a lineup of students waiting to go down the slide on their first lunchtime of second grade, and her hair was all Ant could see in front of him. He wanted to touch the shiny.

So, he did.

"Ow!" The girl slapped his hand away. "Don't pull."

His fingers came away with a few long strands. Staring after her as she took her turn on the slide, Ant watched her find a seat on a swing across the playground. After his turn on the slide, Ant hefted his lunchbox and sat on the swing next to hers.

"I'm Ant."

She squinted at him. "Like the bug?"

"Like Anthony. What's your name?"

She continued to squint at him. Ant picked at his shirt self-consciously, noticing a jam stain from breakfast. The fabric was faded. An orange cat shooting lasers from its eyes sat on a grey background.

"I'm Lilly," she finally said. "I like your shirt."

Ant beamed. "It's my favorite! I love cats."

"Me too!" Lilly slung a Hello Kitty purse off her arm to show Ant. "Y'know my cousin's cat is gonna have babies soon."

"Cool," Ant fiddled with the latch on his lunch box, clicking it open, then closed, then open again. "Would you like to be my girlfriend?"

"What will you give me?"

"What do you want?"

"I'd like a gumball."

Ant leapt off the swing. "And then you'll be my girlfriend?"

"Yes," Lilly said. "But don't pull my hair again."

Ant ran into the school. He headed for the secretary's office, where he knew the little gumball

machine sat under close watch. A thought stopped him.

Frantically searching the pockets of his shorts, Ant's heart fell.

He didn't have a quarter.

Nearby a boy exited the hallway bathroom. Ant recognized him.

"Jacob!"

The boy turned, yanking up his fly. "Hey Ant! Got any Doritos today? My mom keeps giving me apple slices."

"I need a quarter," Ant said.

"I don't have a quarter." Jacob adjusted his fly again. "Try Oscar in the gym closet."

Ant paled. "Oscar?"

"He's always willing to trade."

Ant ran for the gym.

A light bulb in desperate need of changing flickered overhead as he entered the closet. It smelled awful. Like sweat and old socks and baseball gloves. Ant plugged his nose. Shelves and racks of P.E. equipment closed in around him as he followed the sound of voices to the back. Seated atop a tall stack of orange plastic chairs was the largest boy Ant had ever seen. Oscar stared down at Ant. Ant stopped as two boys standing on the ground stepped forward to meet him.

These were sixth graders.

Ant cleared his throat. "I need a quarter."

"What will you give me?" Oscar asked.

Ant held up his lunchbox.

"What else?"

"I don't have anything else."

The older boys laughed. The stack of chairs Oscar sat on swayed.

Desperation built in Ant's chest, and he whipped off his shirt, holding it out. "It's my favorite. I need a quarter. Please."

Oscar eyed him. For a moment there was silence.

Then the large boy nodded to his friends, and they took Ant's lunchbox and shirt. Oscar flicked down a quarter. Ant caught it. "What should I do?" Staring up at Jacob's dangling legs, Ant watched his friend climb the monkey bars.

"Well," Jacob hopped down with a grunt, "my brother says that boyfriends and girlfriends have sex when they're in love."

"How do I do that?"

"First, you buy Ring Pops and get married. Then," Jacob leaned in conspiratorially, "you walk around the school three times while holding hands. Then you'll get pregnant and become a man."

"I'll get pregnant?"

"No! Lilly will."

Ant scrutinized him. "Have you had sex before?"

"Oh yeah." Jacob shrugged nonchalantly. "Loads of times."

"No you haven't."

"Sure I have! Look." Jacob grabbed Ant by the shoulders. "You do wanna marry her, don't you?"

"Well yeah," Ant said. "She has pretty hair and she likes cats."

After school Ant stopped at the corner store by his house. Hurrying to a rack of chips near the back, Ant pushed it over. While the owner was distracted Ant snagged two Ring Pops and darted back outside.

The next day at school Ant proposed. Lilly accepted, on one condition—that they could have a family. Ant agreed, and Jacob officiated their wedding.

The trio stood under a rusty geodome in the playground during lunch, and when Jacob was done talking, Lilly and Ant donned their Ring Pops. Then the two of them joined hands and went off to walk their three laps around the school. Ant didn't particularly enjoy the way Lilly's hand got all sweaty and sticky, but he supposed it was a fair price to pay to become a man.

They decided to name their first child Anthony Junior.

When Ant got home after school, he proudly approached his mother, who stood washing dishes at the kitchen sink. "I had sex today."

The clanking of dishes stopped. "What?"

Ant showed her the remaining plastic of his now-eaten ring pop and explained. His mother made him sit down. Ant waited for his father to come home from work, and when he finally did, they had the "Talk." Ant was horribly confused. His father kept going on and on about always wearing raincoats, when, clearly, it was still sunny outside.

Nevertheless, Ant returned to school the next day wearing his favorite green raincoat. Just in case he and Lilly had sex again.

During lunch, Lilly presented Ant with their son, a brown stuffed bear.

As Ant held Anthony Junior, a thought crossed his mind.

"How many kids do you want?" he asked.

"I'd like at least seven."

Ant blinked in alarm. "But I only have two hands."

"So?"

"How am I gonna hold them all?"

Lilly thought for a moment. "How about four? We can each hold two."

"Okay." He stared at Anthony Junior as Lilly continued talking. Their new son had Lilly's hair, and this made Ant very happy.

"Do you promise?"

Ant found Lilly staring at him. "Huh?"

Lilly frowned. "Were you listening?"

Sheepishly, Ant shook his head.

"My parents are married," she repeated, "and they always yell at each other. I don't like it. Will you promise not to yell at me?"

"I promise."

"Good. Now I think Anthony Junior needs a sister," Lilly paused, then added, "because I'd like a girl next. Can you bring one of your stuffed animals tomorrow?"

Ant nodded. "I think we should name her Lillian Junior."

"I like that." Lilly blushed. She tucked a piece of shiny hair behind one ear and Ant was pleased to see the Ring Pop plastic still on her finger.

Near the end of lunch, they joined hands and walked three more times around the school. The next day, Ant arrived at school with a green stuffed snake, having carefully selected Lillian Junior from his pile of stuffed animals. When he went outside to find Lilly during lunch, a familiar brown bear caught his eye instead.

Anthony Junior lay on the ground under a swing.

Running to the bear, Ant scooped him off the ground and hurried to wipe the dirt from his fur. He looked around in concern. Where was Lilly?

He spotted her across the playground.

Sitting with another boy. An older boy.

Leaning in closely, Lilly stared engrossed at the phone the boy held. They laughed. Lilly grabbed the boy's arm to pull his phone closer. The smile that stretched across her face was bigger than Ant had ever seen.

Ant's stomach dropped. Something hot built inside of his chest. Teetering on the balls of his feet, Ant opened his mouth to let it out.

Then clamped it shut.

He remembered his promise to Lilly.

Ant turned and ran.

The hot feeling in Ant's chest became cold and heavy as the day passed. He avoided Lilly. Seeing the Ring Pop plastic on his finger made his stomach hurt. His raincoat became uncomfortable. In an attempt to make the feelings go away, when Ant got home, he threw his ring in the garbage and tossed all of his raincoats into the yard. The neighbor's dog found the raincoats and tore them apart. His mother was not happy about that.

Lying in bed that evening, Ant decided he and Lilly needed to have a conversation. One where neither of them yelled.

Lilly found him first the next day, her face full of concern. "Have you seen Anthony Junior?"

Ant took their children out of his bag. Lilly looked relieved.

"Is that Lillian Junior?" she asked. "Can I hold her?"

"I found Anthony Junior on the ground by the swings yesterday."

"Oh."

"Why did you leave him there?" Ant's voice grew quieter. "Why were you sitting with another boy?"

"My cousin's cat finally had kittens," Lilly said. "He asked if I wanted to see pictures, so I ran over."

"Why didn't you invite me too? We could have looked at pictures as a family."

Lilly looked away. "I got so excited I forgot."

Ant said nothing.

"Are we still together?"

Something in Ant's stomach hurt again. "Dunno."

"I'm sorry, Ant."

"What will you give me?"

Lilly looked at him. Their eyes met. After a long moment, Lilly ran away.

Ant tried desperately not to cry. He wished the hot feeling in his chest would come back so he could forget how much his stomach hurt. He wished he hadn't had sex. He wished he hadn't thrown away his ring. He wished too many different things all at once and the force of it made him sit down. Holding his children close, Ant pulled his knees to his chest and pressed his face against Anthony Junior's fur. He squeezed his eyes shut. Tears slipped out to wet the soft fur.

Footsteps approached. Ant opened his eyes.

Lilly stood in front of him, arm outstretched. Seated in her palm was a blue gumball. Her Hello Kitty purse was missing from her arm. "Would you like to visit the kittens with me after school?" She looked at Ant, then at their children. "As a family."

Wiping his eyes, Ant looked at the gumball. Then at Lilly. In the sunlight, her brown hair was no longer just shiny. It glowed.

Ant stared in awe. The pain in his stomach melted into warmth.

Taking the gumball, he popped it into his mouth. There was a loud crack. Ant spat out half and offered it to Lilly. "Yes."

noc

Religion / Euphoria

Poet - Paige Pierce Artist - Tabitha Gimbel

*that space where you once laid
the rasp of your voice
on empty museum walls
pious and kind
or so we like to say*

*you took the words from my open mouth
and made them into a prophecy*

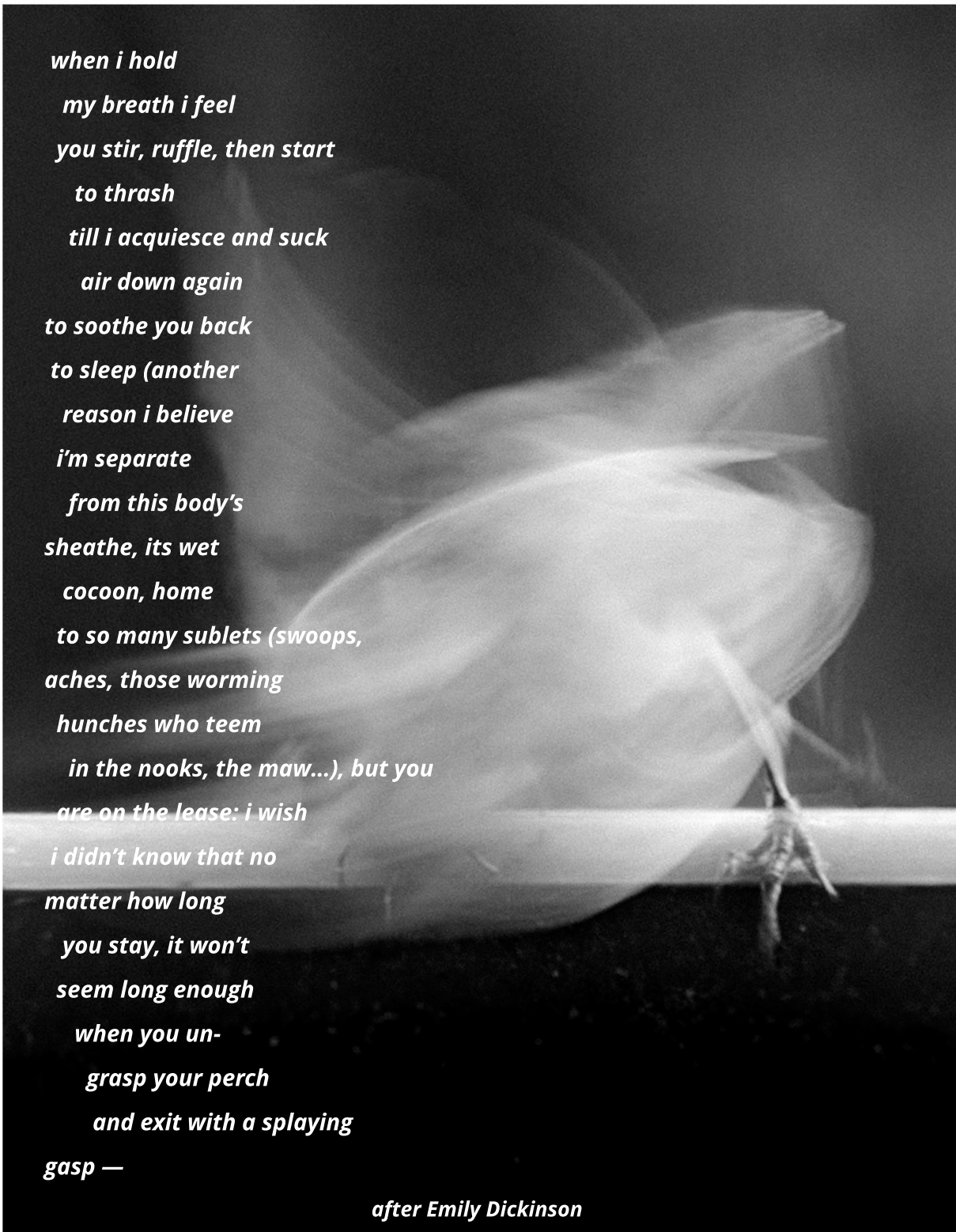
*the light of my morning haze
and the warm aura of your humour
merely exists in fragments
of love and lost language
when religion has never been my forte*

*but I can see it now
I can see why everyone believes in benevolence
when you and I have always fit together
so completely
and so impossibly
standing in your place*



when I hold / Blur

Poet - Neil Surkan / Artist - Kim D. Arthouse



*when i hold
my breath i feel
you stir, ruffle, then start
to thrash
till i acquiesce and suck
air down again
to soothe you back
to sleep (another
reason i believe
i'm separate
from this body's
sheathe, its wet
cocoon, home
to so many sublets (swoops,
aches, those worming
hunches who teem
in the nooks, the maw...), but you
are on the lease: i wish
i didn't know that no
matter how long
you stay, it won't
seem long enough
when you un-
grasp your perch
and exit with a splaying
gasp —*

after Emily Dickinson

About the Contributors

JENNY ADAMS is a painter with a decade of practice, whose work has been juried into the Sooke Fine Arts Show, the Federation of Canadian Artists and the Ladysmith Gallery. She paints landscapes inspired by reference photos, aiming to transport viewers to the exact place and moment where she stood taking the shot. Her painting 'Powerful' appears in Sea Wolf 2025.

KIM D. ARTHOUSE is a neurodivergent photographer specializing in black-and-white composition. Kim was first introduced to photography by her uncle in childhood. Early influences include Ansel Adams, followed in later years by street photography masters such as Flo Fox, with whom she had the privilege of a brief personal interaction before her passing. Kim studied art and poetry academically but is a self-taught photographer, drawing inspiration from artists, writers, and photographers worldwide across cultures and disciplines. Photography serves as her primary mode of expression, offering a means to communicate perspective in ways that words often cannot. The act of composition serves as a meditative process for Kim. The greatest reward is the ability to inspire others to engage with the arts or to discover the artist within themselves. Kim strongly values community and mutual support within the arts and is grateful to be part of a welcoming and collaborative creative environment. Her photograph 'Blur' appears in Sea Wolf 2025.

EMERALD AYRES was born in Texas and moved to British Columbia with her family in 2009. After over a decade of living on Lasqueti Island, she moved to Nanaimo to pursue a Creative Writing degree at Vancouver Island University. Emerald enjoys crocheting chaotic-looking blankets, laughing at her own jokes, and playing Dungeons and Dragons with friends. Her publishing credits include one piece of fiction with GOOEY Magazine and one piece of non-fiction with The Navigator. Her short story 'Becoming a Man' appears in Sea Wolf 2025.

JESSIE BLACKBOURN currently writes historical and contemporary fiction, often with speculative elements. Her short story "Love" was published in the anthology "The Philosophy of Blue" in 2023, and she is a founding member of the Rockets to Runes inter-provincial writing group, now in its fifth year. She is also a member of the Alexandra Writers Centre Society and the BC Federation of Writers. She works as a palliative care nurse and gratefully lives with her family and too many pets on the unceded and traditional territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation, in Nanaimo, BC. You can find her on Instagram at @jessicablackbournauthor. Her short story 'Josef's Lake' appears in Sea Wolf 2025.

AIDAN COLLIER moved to Canada 17 years ago to study philosophy. After dropping out of academia (twice), he worked as a teacher and then in Marketing. His poem 'Final Sailing,' an ekphrasis of Charlotte Mougeot's 'A New Chapter' appears in Sea Wolf 2025.

FANTINO DURANTE is in Grade 7 at Chemainus Secondary School and loves incorporating humour into his writing, as shown in his short story "The Tortilla Chip People". When he's not at school, Tino is either tending to his small dogs, Wilbur and Honey or playing soccer. Tino would love to be a professional soccer player when he grows up, but his backup plan is working at BC Ferries. He's not sure what the future will bring, but one thing's for sure, he'll keep writing more silly stories. His short story 'The Tortilla Chip People' appears in Sea Wolf 2025.

TABITHA GIMBEL is a mixed-media collage artist, passionate about creating worlds that reflect her inner landscape, with themes of mysticism and melancholy blending with hope and rebirth. For commission inquiries, she can be reached at evolutioncollages@gmail.com, and you can find her art on her Instagram page @tabscreativecollages. Her collage 'Euphoria' was selected by poet Neil Surkan for his ekphrastic poem 'when I hold'.

LILY HEPPELL is in grade 7 at Chemainus Secondary School. She loves soccer, volleyball, rugby, track and field and reading. Her favourite genre of books is fantasy and her favourite book series is "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" by Rick Riordan. Lily's short story is inspired by the novel series "Survivors" by Erin Hunter, and her love of dogs. When Lily grows up, she wants to be a veterinarian or play a sport professionally. Although this isn't Lily's first short story, this is the first time she has shared one of her stories beyond her teachers or family. Her short story 'Strays' appears in Sea Wolf 2025.

CATRIONA HICKS is a Dover Bay Secondary School senior. She loves creative writing, Japanese and performing arts. She is heading to VIU after graduation to pursue the theatre program. She likes fiction that is exciting and captivating but that also reflects reality. In her spare time, Catriona has taken up knitting and textiles and enjoys improving her skills while watching her favourite shows. Catriona has plans for a fantasy novel and hopes to write her first draft this summer. Catriona was born in the Northwest Territories so she really appreciates the temperate climate on Vancouver Island. She loves swimming in the ocean year-round. Her short story, 'Reimagined', appears in Sea Wolf 2025.

IHMANI JOSH is a high school student whose thoughts travel right to her palms and seep through her fingertips as she writes. Throughout her life she has chosen storytelling as her preferred method of communication, most often in the form of short fiction and poetry. Although she has written many pieces in the past in both of these mediums, they remain mainly in notebooks, scribbled in messy handwriting. This is her first time entering her work for a contest and did so at the request of her creative writing teacher. She hopes that her appetite for connection and concocting tales shines through all her work. Her short story "The House Guest" appears in *Sea Wolf* 2025.

CHARLOTTE MOUGEOT is a self-taught artist who has lived in Nanaimo since 2017. Charlotte is originally from Quebec and has lived in Manitoba, Alberta, Yukon and BC. Charlotte's preferred medium is oil paint. She also enjoys the flexibility, playfulness and practicality of acrylic paint. Since living on the coast, Charlotte has loved the ever-changing play of sky and sea. Charlotte borrows this artist statement by John Stuart Price from Victoria. "My goal is to share with others what my eyes see, my heart feels, and my soul yearns to understand. Each painting has a unique story and message, and I strive to share that experience as eloquently and creatively as possible". Her painting 'A New Chapter' was selected by poets Jennavieve Strub and Aidan Collier for their ekphrastic poetry in *Sea Wolf* 2025.

PAIGE PIERCE is the City of Nanaimo's Youth Poet Laureate (2024-2026) and serves as a literary ambassador for young writers in the community. Paige has hosted a poetry summer camp and workshops, performed with the Vancouver Island Symphony, served as a judge for the Nanaimo Arts Council's Ekphrastic competition, hosted sessions at the Cowichan Valley School District's Young Authors Conference, and has appeared at many public events since being appointed to the position. She is also the author of eight published poetry books, including *Losing Languages* and *Stomach Aches*. Paige graduated from Vancouver Island University's Bachelor of Education program in June of 2025 and now works as a high school English and Social Studies teacher. Her poem 'Religion,' an ekphrasis of 'Euphoria' by Tabitha Gimbel, appears in *Sea Wolf* 2025.

JENNAVIEVE STRUB was born and raised on Vancouver Island. She is in her fourth year at Vancouver Island University, where she is completing a Bachelor's Degree with a double-major in Psychology and Creative Writing. She enjoys writing poetry and non-fiction and is passionate about photography. Her fiction piece "Burned" appeared in *The Navigator*. Her photography pieces "The Only One Here" and "Manmade" appear in *Portal* magazine's 2025 issue, where she worked as a BC Magazines Merch and Subscriptions intern, a Copy Editor, Fiction Editor, and a member of the Social Media team. In her free time you can find her running her freelance photography business, writing her first book, working at Chapters, or reading romance books. Her short story 'Words that Float' and poem 'someone I used to know' appears in *Sea Wolf* 2025.

NEIL SURKAN is the current Poet Laureate of Nanaimo, BC. He is the author of three books of poetry — *Empties* (forthcoming March 2026), *Unbecoming*, and *On High* — and the chapbooks *Die Workbook*, *Ruin*, *Their Queer Tenderness*, and *Super, Natural*. His award-winning poems have appeared in numerous Canadian magazines. A Professor in the Department of English at Vancouver Island University, he lives in Nanaimo, on the traditional territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation, with Luca, Edi, and Lloyd. www.neilsurkan.com. His poem 'when I hold,' an ekphrasis of 'Blur' by Kim D Arthouse, appears in *Sea Wolf* 2025.

ERIN TZVETCOFF is an emerging writer of poetry and short fiction, whose work often reflects personal experiences. She is also a visual artist. Her painting inspired a winning poem in the 2024 Ekphrastic Poetry Celebration. Her poem 'Reflections of myself,' and ekphrasis of 'Powerful' by Jenny Adams, appears in *Sea Wolf* 2025.

ANTHALIA UMANETZ lives in Nanaimo with her family. She is inspired by her cat Boots, and also her best friend, who enjoys going by "The Asterix Queen". Anthalia is almost finished with fourth grade and has entered one of the sixteen chapters of her novel into the competition. She plays a bit of basketball and hopes to make the team in fifth grade. She is working on her second novel, but has nothing published. Yet. That is until now. Her short story, 'Marigold: Carnation Rescue', appears in *Sea Wolf* 2025.

SOLANA VAN de LEUR is a Grade 10 competitive figure skater and aspiring author. Whether she's gliding across the ice or at her desk crafting fantasy worlds, Solana has a deep love for anything creative. An avid reader, she draws inspiration from the books she finds herself lost in and channels that passion into her own writing. Her future ambitions include getting her in-progress novel published and to be recognized by readers around the world. Beyond writing and reading, she loves painting, drawing and traveling. She hopes to continue to grow and develop as both a writer and an artist and is excited to see where her storytelling journey takes her next. Her short story 'The Girl of Ink and Fire' appears in *Sea Wolf* 2025.

HARALD WETKLO His painting, 'boomerang' was selected from the 2025 Nanaimo Artwalk exhibition for the cover of *Sea Wolf*.



THE GEEKS ON THE BEACH

778.432.2600 | A FULL SERVICE WEB AGENCY | GEEKSONTHEBEACH.CA

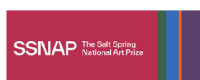
PROUD SUPPORTERS
OF THE VANCOUVER ISLAND AND
BC ARTS COMMUNITY FOR 18 YEARS!

NICE WEB
DESIGNERS.
SERIOUS
BUSINESS.



"The Geeks created a masterpiece of a website for us—collaborative, beautiful, and easy to manage. Three years later, it still performs flawlessly and turns heads."

— Sooke Fine Arts Society



Salt Spring
National Art Prize
saltspringartprize.ca



Nanaimo Arts Council
nanaimoartscouncil.ca



Chemainus Festival
of Murals Society
muraltown.com



Arts Council of Ladysmith
and District
ladysmitharts.ca/



Victoria International
Jewish Film Festival
vijff.ca



Sooke Fine Arts Society
sookefinearts.com



TAMARA KRONIS MP

MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT
NANAIMO—LADYSMITH

Thoughtfully curated and beautifully presented, this magazine and its content are a testament to the power of storytelling and poetry to reflect place, imagination, and the many stages of creative life.

Congratulations to all!



250-244-5085

Tamara.Kronis@parl.gc.ca

www.TamaraKronisMP.ca

**WORKING
FOR YOU**

Islands Short Fiction Review and Ekphrastic Poetry Celebration

The Islands Short Fiction Review and the Ekphrastic Poetry Celebration are annual literary events hosted by the Nanaimo Arts Council. They are open to writers from across Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands.

For more information, check out the
Nanaimo Arts Council's website:
<https://nanaimoartscouncil.ca>



INDIE BOOKSTORE



NEW BOOKS
FICTION, NONFICTION, POETRY, AND MORE!

#6 321 WELSEY STREET
INFO@WINDOWSEATBOOKS.CA
WINDOWSEATBOOKS.CA



WINDOWSEAT BOOKS

SEA WOLF

LITERARY REVIEW

CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Emerald Ayres
Jessica Blackbourn
Fantino Durante
Lily Heppel
Catriona Hicks
Ihmani Josh
Jennavieve Strub
Anthalia Umanetz
Solana Van de Leur

POETRY

Aidan Collier
Paige Pierce
Jennavieve Strub
Neil Surkan
Erin Tzvetcoff

ART

Jenny Adams
Kim D. Arthouse
Tabitha Gimbel
Charlotte Mougeot
Harald Wetklo