



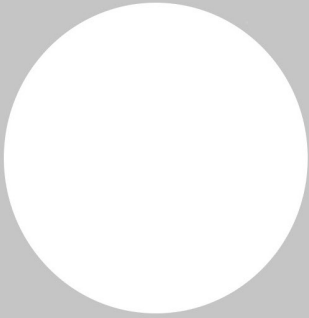
THE QUILLIAD  
ISSUE 12



SING TO ME,

OH GODDESS MUSE.

-HOMER, THE ILIAD



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Bezoar</b>	Sara Wilson. . .	8
<b>Pandemic at Lughnasa</b>	Kate Werneburg . . .	9
<b>Fluid</b>	Kate Werneburg . . .	12
<b>As Though It Were A Broom Closet</b>	KT Bryski . . .	14
<b>Wound Salter</b>	Matthew Gordon . . .	16
<b>Angelotomy Art</b>	Elana Wolff . . .	21
<b>zombie apocalypse</b>	Michael Russell . . .	22
<b>Ares</b>	Amy Brereton . . .	24
<b>Policy proposal</b>	Spenser Smith . . .	25
<b>evil is the line</b>	sb. smith . . .	26
<b>Weeding The Experiential Archives</b>	H. E. Casson . . .	28
<b>Alicorn 2108 A.M.</b>	Matte . . .	34
<b>Monsters</b>	Zachery Cooper . . .	39
<b>Cocaine Birds</b>	Zachery Cooper . . .	40
<b>A few more lines</b>	Louise Carson . . .	41
<b>Milfoil</b>	Judith Skillman . . .	42
<b>Beast</b>	Savanna Scott Leslie . . .	43
<b>Stick Guy</b>	Bailey Bjolin . . .	46

CW for death, emotional abuse, violence, drugs, discussion of violence against addicts, discussion of ableism, discussion of murder and suicide.





## **Bezoar**

Sara Wilson

Cut your ribs open  
and sift for horses'  
chokes, or the snake's pearls,  
knocked off your mantle  
and rattled like dice  
across your bones.

I imagine these to be like sea-  
glass: green, against the shore,  
sanded by salt until nothing  
is left to gleam.

Remember your fingers, turned red,  
for soothing, for stones.

Remember, the remedy for some  
poison is formed slow.

## **Pandemic at Lughnasa**

*Niagara/Toronto, 1990/2020, for a Celtic grandfather*

Kate Werneburg

I should have baked bread,  
but didn't

Should have danced in the park,  
but couldn't

No sheep was shorn, though I did give a haircut,  
black curls embedding in the bathroom grout

Lugh hid his trickster face behind a gathering storm

Lughnasa, and Lammastide,  
a point in the year's wheel bigger, darker—Daddad died.  
Thirty years dark, thirty years round, thirty years wide, already.

He was somewhat old, and I was very young  
I still think of him and weep

Love is not intellect or sameness or matching  
but care and trust and enthusiasm

Love turns on a wheel  
runs up and down a spiral.  
We loved each other because we did  
and I will never never never never never stop mourning him.

The wheel of this year turns  
like the old iron merry-go-round  
kicked at in the dry dirt

Spinning and spinning and never  
moving

Built by the baker  
rusted by the rains  
we spun ourselves sick in the golden afternoon  
and came home to find Daddad going  
round and round his rosary

Spinning and spinning and never  
moving

He stopped, and cuddled us  
or  
we climbed into his lap, and he instructed us  
going round and round the beads, *not a necklace, not an ornament*,  
praying and repeating and reflecting

Spinning and spinning and never  
moving

One Lughnasa he left us. One Lammastide he went.

My mother came home and taught me the prayer for the dead.

The procession from church, I cried one tear for every step,  
eyes down, splashing square paving stones from the church door  
to what was then the new plot of the graveyard  
Overlooking the park. Full up now, or just about.

We came home, and I made him a  
terrible hand-drawn child's flag—paper and straw.  
All the other soldiers had one, shouldn't he?

Nana left it in the rain, to dissolve into the Earth.  
The August rains with the thrust of fall in them.

I used to call her every August first.  
This year, she is in the graveyard too. Full up.

This dark Lammastide, this year of stoppage, blockage, death

Spinning, and spinning and never  
moving

The feast is marked by a brisk walk through trees whipped by the  
coming rains  
Racing the heavy clouds back to my door

Behind them, Lugh's laughing face, and long warrior arms covering  
Spin they now all together, watching,

Spinning and spinning and never  
moving

## Fluid

Kate Werneburg

I am as fluid as a swooping  
bat  
under a streetlamp

I am as innocent as the smelling  
snake  
weaving through your garden  
to consume your vermin

I am as constant as the tiny frothing  
stream  
cutting through your basement  
on my own ancient path

I am as clean as a hand-washed  
rag

I am as good as an old  
cutting board

I am as terrifying as a  
three-legged  
dog

I am as natural as  
rot

I am an ideally twisted fruit tree  
which curves and curls and winnows out  
into a violet twilight sky  
Leafless  
Reaching  
Fragrant

I am here, anyway,

no matter how gently you close  
the car doors and childlock them.

I am as fluid as the waning, waxing,  
moon

Endless, eternal, ancient, always.

## **As Though It Were A Broom Closet**

KT Bryski

You knew what lay behind the door.

You smelled it the moment you alighted from your husband's golden carriage. A faint corrosive bitterness shadowed the rich roasted peacock and pale champagne; it seeped through his spiced cologne as he kissed you. Rot lurked under the furiously blooming orchids in the greenhouse and oozed through the castle's marbled walls.

On the third floor, at the end of a disused hallway, there stood a locked door. Plain wood, unadorned. You trained your eyes to skate over it as though it were a broom closet. That was his explanation, carelessly given. It was easy to let yourself believe him. You had scarce reason to visit the third floor anyway. His billiards room resided there, and his pipe collection, and the lesser library stuffed with books that lulled you to sleep.

No, you preferred to bask in the solarium, admiring the sunlight's sheen on your new silken gowns and drowsing on pillows like rose-patterned clouds. Or you were preoccupied—taking lessons with his automaton dance master (a clockwork marvel, especially purchased from a Swiss workshop and worth more than your entire home village). Or you were bored—creeping to the kitchens for another treat. He stocked the shelves with pastries dripping sunlight and honey, hard candies boiled from the sweeping aurorae, wine mulled with the tears of stars.

When he pressed the grubby key upon you, you smiled. You did not shudder as his heavy fingers closed over yours. Instead, you stood on tiptoe to kiss him goodbye, his beard scratching your lips like steel wool.

When he returned three days later, you handed him the key: unblemished, untouched.

He laughed: a harsh bark of surprise. No one had ever proved so loyal, he crowed. No one had ever passed his test. You are remarkable; you are inimitable. As his cheeks flushed beneath the beard, you reclined on a jewelled couch and let his praise wash over you.

Key or not, you've always known.

You hear their silent condemnation through the third-floor door; their mouths falling slack and throats opening wide as blood drips to rusted grates. Behind unadorned wood, their clouded eyes

judge you; maggots slide down their putrid cheeks like tears. As he grabs you close at night, their phantom fingers twine through your hair, tap at your shoulder, cajoling you to rise, to strike, to finish him once and for all.

When you do not, their whispers turn vicious. He will tire of you; your corpse will take its place among his former wives; you betray your sisters and your *duty*.

Perhaps and perhaps and perhaps.

And yet—

The solarium is very warm in winter. You have nearly mastered the minuet. And you have grown fond of the sweet honeyed clouds that melt on your tongue.

So you ignore the screams and pleading. Swallowing your self-reproach, you press close to your husband. You wash away the crusts of blood beneath his fingernails.

You kiss him through his blue, blue beard.



## Wound Salter

Matthew Gordon

*“Truth is an honest thief, she brings you back your mirror.”*

The rest of the doors were plain, wooden and locked. The Wound Salter’s door was framed by ornately carved gold cast into angels blowing their trumpets at a shimmering diamond star. Its silver portcullis swung open for every entrant to the Wound Salter’s premises, always far enough to reveal the foyer inside.

The foyer’s walls were wood-panelled, with all the wainscoting expected of a turn-of-the-century mansion. On either side, there was a wooden door with a brass handle moulded into the shape of a roaring lion’s head. Straight ahead, the double doors opened to a gaudy new gaslit chandelier and then to forked staircases, one that led toward a variety of much-required cleaning rooms, the other toward the turret where the Wound Salter maintained his operations. Within the turret, to one side there was an unlocked sitting room where anyone could wait to engage the Wound Salter, but which laid regretfully empty despite its marble fireplace, array of accent couches, and immense bay window that overlooked the castles and the streets below. To the other side lay the Wound Salter’s office door, inlaid with a large opaque bottom panel. The top panel was frosted so that all anyone who looked through it could tell was whether the light was on. Behind that door, the Wound Salter held court.

A flurry of inconsistent light and thunderclaps jolted Hope Altmark into the realization that the person before her was not yet finished. A scream rang out as the light inside the room flickered again. The door shook on its hinges. Another flicker—another scream. It sounded to Hope like whoever was in there was being struck by lightning. A soft gurgling sound took over the silent airwaves, making Hope wonder if the person inside the room was bleeding from the mouth, before another scream proved her wrong. Hope straightened her white leather gloves, which still held a dark mottling from the snow that had fallen on her right before she passed the portcullis. Her breaths sped with the increasing frequency of lightning strikes and screams; she felt like she was spying on this previous attendee, but her ear strayed closer to the frosted panel as though she were hearing Medusa. She could feel the cold of the frosted panel through

her cloche hat.

The Wound Salter's office door opened as if by itself, without a controlling human hand. A puff of black smoke dissipated as Hope entered the room, breathing shallowly and softly. The Wound Salter was the only person present. He sat behind an immense cherry desk adorned with only a small brass table clock whose ticking matched Hope's pulse. The face was pointed toward the Wound Salter, leaving a circular moulded lion to glare at her.

"Please," the Wound Salter said in a soft, coarse voice, "take a seat. I imagine you booked this appointment to discuss a transaction with me. I won't have you doing that standing up."

Hope looked around at the walls. They had inlaid bookshelves packed with tomes she couldn't recognize because the shelves were so far away and the print was so small. Behind the Wound Salter stood another bay window, this one with a starry night behind it. Hope sat, confused, in the only chair facing the Wound Salter's desk; she'd arrived at midday.

"Sorry, I'm just a little jittery, I suppose," Hope said, fiddling with her dress under the desk. "I thought I heard someone in here a minute ago and that maybe I was interrupting."

"Time passes quickly in these halls," the Wound Salter explained to an unsatisfied Hope. "That's also why you didn't see the last person to visit me, even though you thought you might have seen something."

The thunderstorm inside the room, the gurgling of what Hope thought was blood, the screams, the puff of black smoke—could Hope have dreamt them?

After a series of short breaths, the Wound Salter began. "People come to me for therapeutic reasons," he began, carefully ignoring Hope's wide brown eyes, "because they have some inner guilt or shame they feel the need to embrace. I do not ask why they seek to embrace such things but I know by looking at them what it is that causes them so much sickness. I—"

"How do you—"

"Do you usually make evening appointments with professionals in their offices so you can walk in and interrupt them as they explain their crafts?"

Hope, suddenly cold, wrapped her chest in her arms.

The Wound Salter turned to Hope, a shadow over his face below his solid charcoal fedora. He extended his hands toward the middle of

his empty desk, pulling the cuffs of his starched white shirt past the cuffs of his solid charcoal suit. "You're divorced, aren't you?" he said. "In this day, divorced."

Hope trembled. Her ring finger itched where the rings used to be.

"He was a kind man, just unable to provide the precise level of lifestyle to which you became accustomed shortly before you met him, I know," the Wound Salter continued. "I won't judge. I, too, have been of dubious material circumstances."

Hope blinked repeatedly, recalling her memories of the labyrinthine trail she had taken through the first three parts of the Wound Salter's mansion. Idly, she rubbed one of the arms of her chair, the velvet soft against her exposed wrist.

"This mansion is not without upkeep," the Wound Salter said.

Hope nodded so absently she had gone far past wondering whether her senses deceived her. The imposing man in front of her did not resemble anyone she had known to exist. "I don't know how you could know ... I mean, about me, and about Orton ... about what went wrong ..." She would have cried if her emotional state could rise above confusion.

The Wound Salter shook his head. "I don't care that you're divorced because that's not why you're here. What you're here to see me about is far more deep-seated than that. You could have inherited it from an ancestor, or a group of them, or anyone who looks like you on the street at night. It's ... dare I say it's hardly your sin at all, but it's your guilt, and it's your shame. It slits your guts from an unseen direction, and you think any amount of pain I cause you will be a tap on the shoulder by comparison."

Hope's heart hurt.

"Admit that I'm right," the Wound Salter hissed, "and we can proceed with the payment."

"You are," she said. "You're right, I mean. I don't know what's going to happen here, but I need you right now. I need you, and I can't articulate why except this feels like the only way I'll purify myself, the only way I'll set myself free."

Hope unzipped her purse, which she had smartly carried over one shoulder, and which was so small it could barely hold her handkerchief but was, in times of need, capable of carrying five thousand dollars in cash.

“Wait,” Hope said as she handed over the bills, her bile climbing in her throat, “before we begin ...”

“Looks right,” the Wound Salter said as he counted the bills.

“No, I know I came with the right amount, I just ... I’m nervous. I’ve heard there are side effects to ... having your wounds salted. Pain, madness, convulsions ... I’ve heard of some people dying because of this.”

“People do all sorts of things when they face the people they think they are,” the Wound Salter said. “I have very little control over your situation.”

“You do?”

“Of course. Anything you endure here is truly of your own making, no matter what part I appear to play. I can expose your true nature to you, but any sins you’ve committed, Hope, those are yours alone. Now, I think it’s time to give you some peace of mind.”

Hope shut the office door in anticipation of the treatment that was about to begin. Before she could return to her seat, tears were already streaming down her face, in such torrents they erased her makeup and drenched her cheeks. Numbness spread through her veins as her body stiffened in shock. Her movements slowed to the point of impairment, her body barely obeying her order to sit down. When the fever set in, her head felt like the Wound Salter had taken a hot iron to it, although she couldn’t have, not if she’d been offered her five thousand dollars back and then five thousand more, been able to tell where the Wound Salter was or what he was doing.

Sweat accumulated under the brim of Hope’s hat. She took it off reflexively, and, with no further delusion of ladyhood, wrung it like a goose’s neck with her gloved hands. Her gloves came off next, dripping sweat from their insides. Her chest tightened in the suffocating heat. The bookshelves, with their even more unreadable spines; the desk, with its clock that sat as majestically as it could for such a device that did not tell her the time, although it could; the rug she hadn’t noticed before, but whose bristles leapt like sharp blades of grass at her ankles; all of it spun around and shot through her. Her awareness of the Wound Salter vanished save for a hidden suspicion that the reason she could no longer sense him was because his rate of breathing matched her own.

Ignatius Pemberton held the late evening appointment. He checked his pocket watch, which showed that he had arrived precisely

four minutes before the prescribed eight o'clock. He dusted the snow off his bowler hat as he passed through the open portcullis, a gloved hand lightly touching the silver bars to keep it from slamming shut. Once Ignatius was inside the mansion, his steps worked on muscle memory through the opulent foyer, under the gaslit chandelier, up the stairs toward the turret, past the sitting room, and then right up to the frosted office door. He briefly considered sitting on the couch by the fireplace, passing his time with a literary magazine, but then quickly thought the better of it. He advanced to the Wound Salter's door, hat in hand.

Ignatius had been to see the Wound Salter four times, and not once had he seen or heard what he did that night. He could have sworn that frosted door was hiding a burst of flames that crackled and spat like the Wound Salter had lit a bonfire. Following the flame burst was an explosion so loud it made Ignatius jump, and by the time his calf-high black boots were back on the hardwood, another explosion exceeded the first. As Ignatius moved closer to the frosted panel, he noticed the soft, unmistakable scent of a gas leak emanating from the Wound Salter's room.

**Angelotomy Art**  
Elana Wolff

Dreaming love is nearly  
the eye

assembles slumber-dust  
& tumbles it up—

The first light touch you gave  
was smooth, as moist as orange,

warm & cool: the inner shade of flame.  
I see your face in every negative space.

Not the face I expect to see.  
Geometric as pressure.

There's a way of painting that integrates:  
You keep what you will & leave what you won't

to weather. What's done by sun & wind &  
rain is taken,

synthesized.  
You raged a lot those days & partied hard.

## **zombie apocalypse**

Michael Russell

the first time i said fuck  
my boyfriend broke up with me.

sticky as lazarus, he said

fuck / is a dirty word / fuck / taints those who spit / its sour fruit /  
& fuck / if i was broken / from the same rib as eve / i am a child /  
of sinful fuckery / fuck the devil / must have crimsoned my lips /  
pierced my gay ear / & raised my dick / to compass horny men / with  
pitchforks—

a problem the catholic church knew to fix.

kneel.

beg forgiveness.

pray, pray, repent.

ask god if i deserve a second chance.

on christmas, he gifted me a bar of beaded soap—  
*to scrub away the filth*, he joked.

that season i buried myself  
in lana's *born to die*.

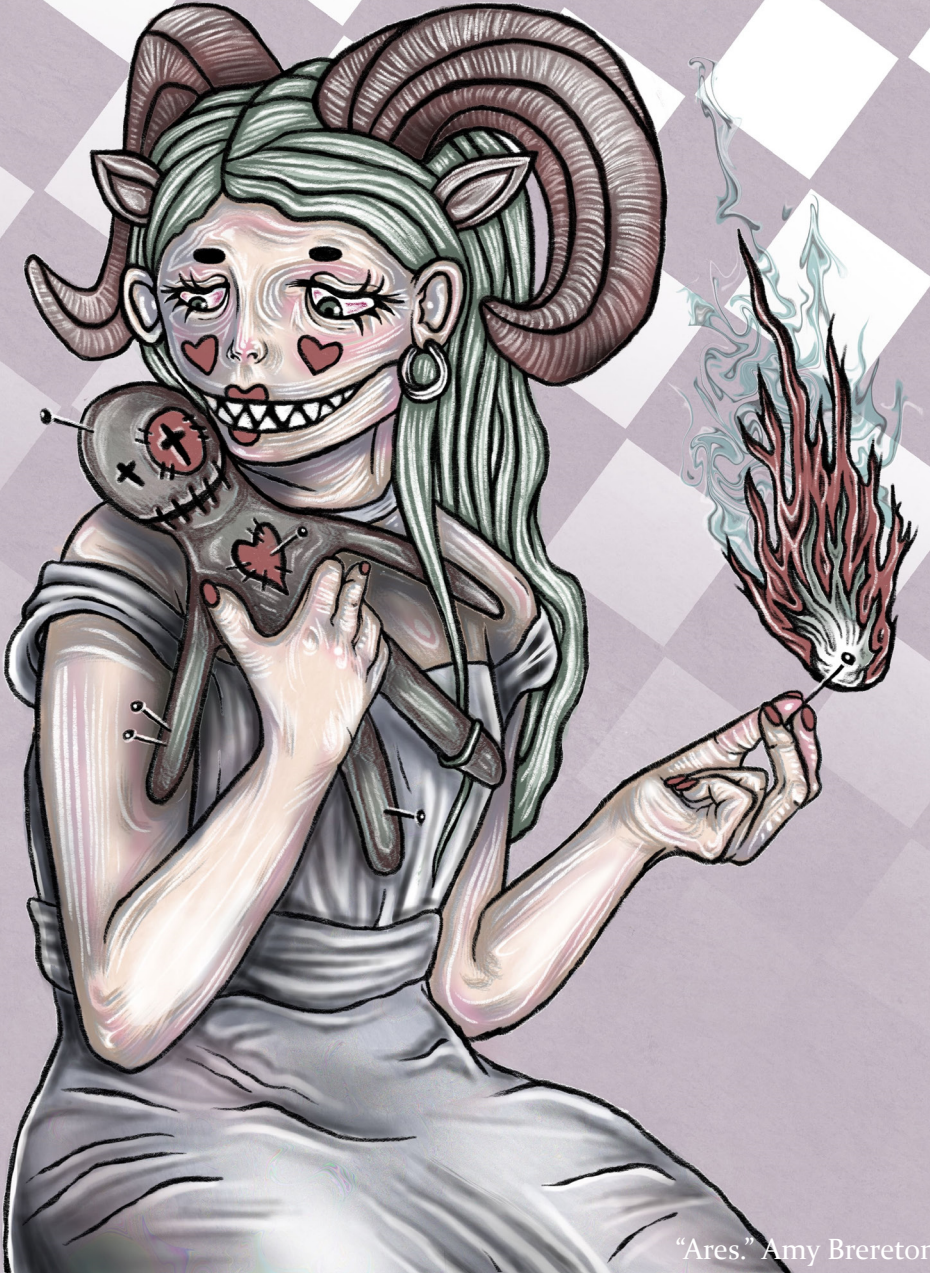
*you know, emotional & unemployed guys are easily replaced.*

a barrage of screenshots of all the dates he turned down for me.

*don't forget, at any moment i can leave. i stay because you need me.*

my boyfriend / is a cheat / on repeat / beyonce's *lemonade* / i  
envision my life / full / of zombies / sex zombies / grief zombies  
/ trauma that digs / through winter soil / abracadabra / a trauma  
zombie / a wounded christian zombie / reminds me / i need a way  
to destroy / the undead / catholic / who paws / at my crotch / i have  
a type / religious men who die / then lazarus / i love / i think / my  
christian boyfriend / but today / he shows me why / i hate my ex.





“Ares.” Amy Brereton.

**Policy proposal**  
Spenser Smith

*“They should be lined up and [have] needles thrown at them like darts.” —Mike Schmidt, Medicine Hat court sheriff, in reference to Medicine Hat residents who inject drugs*

*Facebook comment published in the “Official Medicine Hat Neighbourhood Watch” group  
(August 2019)*

Bodies lined up like old bottles.  
The best bullseye is a body  
clothed in nothing  
but bruises and starlight.  
The best bullseye is my body,  
braced for contact, forever curled  
like a shrimp. Needles splay  
my chest. Ten points  
for a nipple, says the sheriff,  
twenty for an eye. A mosquito  
buzzes into my mouth,  
and I swallow the blood  
of strangers. My body  
has never been my body.

**evil is the line**

sb. smith

daddy's little champagne socialist.  
your scores of jargon, Instagram DMs  
choke me at night, blood pools  
in my dreams. I'm scared,  
to wake up in the morning  
is to find another emptiness  
in your vacuum of grad school  
discourse and personal growth.  
my pill bottles are in the cupboard  
where your hand cannot reach,  
no learning and growing can heal  
the sticky fascia under my skin,  
I cannot teach you my burning hips  
or how charitable donations are not care.  
you gargole of the formal,  
peer-reviewed and academic texts—  
ringggg my phone to death.  
bringgggg me to the edge of survival  
with your pen to my throat.  
a real ally in the streets,  
virtue signaller in the sheets.  
you cross lines I've painted red  
to remind you to stay with your own kind. you suck  
and fuck away my tolerance for your interpretations  
of my fatcripplebitch existence,  
off-base and ill-informed. your class  
is way above me, the poor-poor little sick girl.  
you take what's not yours, art museum allyship.  
still, Marx can't teach you rich bastards  
shit like one-dollar Ragu on level-8 pain days  
or how to bloodlet capitalist sweetheartism.  
Jeff Bezos' gospel taints your bone marrow,  
a disease more evil than any of my monstrosity,  
any of my freak or travelling circus.  
your mom's neat illness in old age a golden coin  
to add to your diversity token collection. precious medals

look like federal disability benefits for abled dependents.  
my precious looks like Instagram's block feature  
when you stick and stone me  
with your research purpose state of mind.

## Weeding The Experiential Archives

H. E. Casson

Before beginning your task, please familiarize yourself with our collection's Major Events and Cultural Phenomena lists. Experiences related to events and phenomena on this list are rated by proximity, rarity, provenance, historical significance, and the quality of the experience. Refer to EACR-6 for standardized qualifiers for these ratings.

Our automated tools have already filtered out recognized important perspectives, based on the Experiential Descriptive System. Remaining perspectives have been flagged by the system as requiring review by staff. Potential duplicate experiences have been tagged for side-by-side comparison.

Weeding can feel counterintuitive to human archivists, but the acronym MUSTY can be of use: Is the experience **M**isleading, **U**gly, **S**uperseded, **T**rivial, or not right for **Y**our collection? If so, weeding this experience will improve the overall quality of your collection!

\* \* \*

You feel the rough texture of the cooler lid under your thighs. Looking down, you see the t-shirt your brother bought you at your first concert. It smells stale. It's been in a drawer for too long. A slender man in shiny silver pants is on stage, a peacock feather in his hat. He sweats. His voice cracks. The highest notes evade him, but not the deepest ecstasies. Whatever he does, the audiences scream, the one on screen and the one around you. If you look too far right or left, you can see the edge of the screen the concert is projected on. You feel two things at the same time:

Glad to be sharing this experience with people who were in the same history 11 class as you, who worked at the same Tim Hortons.

Sad that you couldn't make it to Kingston to see it live.

You stand up so you can take a popsicle from the cooler. You offer one to your brother, who shakes his head, unable to take his eyes off the screen. You crack the frozen treat in half and bite into it. It

tastes more like bananas than bananas do. It drips on your shirt.

*Alert: There are experiences tagged as potential duplicates. Load for side-by-side review? Y/N*

- Weed
- Re-shelve
- Mark for review in next weeding cycle

\* \* \*

The box is moving. Your mothers are both smiling. Does this mean they got you one? Mama Daisy has her Phob out.

“Are you gonna post a Snario of this?”

You wish you’d worn a nicer shirt. You open the lid. Its eyes are the same brown as yours, an upgrade you can’t believe your moms splurged for.

“A Kit-A-Pup!”

You can hear the ad in your head. *The first fully engineered creature made just for kids!* It makes a sound somewhere between a purr and a growl.

- Weed
- Re-shelve
- Mark for review in next weeding cycle

\* \* \*

“What do we want?”

“Peace!”

“When do we want it?”

“Now!”

“What do we want?”

“Peace!”

“When do we want it?”

“Now!”

“No war on Iraq!”

“People before profits!”

“No war on Iraq!”

“People before profits!”

Your cane catches in a streetcar track. Pulled to the left, you stumble into a man keeping rhythm on a djembe.

“You okay?”

Before you can answer, he shouts and signals to another man who is pulling a rickshaw covered in signs.

DROP BUSH NOT BOMBS  
NO BLOOD FOR OIL  
WHO WOULD JESUS BOMB?  
“Give her a ride!”

He offers you his hand, helping you up onto the two wheeled cart. The pain in your legs recedes, but the swelling in your feet still throbs a heartbeat. You catch your breath and immediately release it, seeing the expanse of the crowd from this new height.

“Thank you!” you shout, but the man pulling the cart doesn’t seem to hear you.

*Alert: 17 patrons have requested the removal of this experience from the archive. 22 patrons have requested that this experience not be accessible with a child or youth membership ident. View requests? Y/N*

Weed  Re-shelve  Mark for review in next weeding cycle

\* \* \*

Your thumb slides across the screen. Three candy cane striped circles line up. You feel a thrill as your phone lets loose a series of satisfying dings.

The phone shakes and a text message square pops up, covering the top portion of your screen.

“I’ve filed for divorce.”

Your thumb slides across the screen. Three gummy bears line up.

Weed  Re-shelve  Mark for review in next weeding cycle

\* \* \*

“I dare you.”

Your co-worker is wearing a striped apron. The fabric reminds you of the suits your grandfather used to wear. He is holding two brown circles in his right hand.

“Some of us need our jobs, thanks muchly.”

Still, you're salivating.

"Fine," you relent, "but quickly."

It's still spreading under your tongue as you carry the tray of Maracaibo chocolate truffles out to the waiting guests.

A person wearing a vintage pink-and-blue-flowered Lee Bowery repro plucks one off of your tray with chopsticks.

"I heard it was extinct," they say, their whimsy turning bleak as they draw out the last word.

You look at the floor. You swallow the sweetest spit you've ever had in your mouth.

"Not yet."

*Alert: Final copy of this experience in system. Please confirm with Reference Librarian before recycling, selling, or discarding experience. Forward? Y/N*

Weed  Re-shelve  Mark for review in next weeding cycle

\* \* \*

The beer is watered down, you're sure. It's better than trying to watch the game at home on your dinky black and white, though.

"Turn it up!" the drunk guy in the booth behind you hollers.

Your hand clenches, like an instinct. If he gives you a reason, you know you'd feel better if you could just hit him.

"Where's the game?"

The players are suddenly small in the corner of the screen. That box-in-box feature they do when the commentators come on. Only it's not commentators. It's one of those big truck-looking SUVs. The white Ford Bronco is just cruising along.

*A commercial, you think.*

It doesn't end. The Bronco stays on the screen.

"Put the game back on!"

It's the same guy again. You stand up, wavering between taking a piss and giving your tightening fists something to do.

*Alert: This experience contains violent impulses. Please use care when recycling, selling, or discarding experience.*

Weed  Re-shelve  Mark for review in next weeding cycle



\* \* \*

Most people wear headphones on the subway, but you can't tolerate having hunks of plastic in your ears. The rumble, the hum of conversations, the muffled music, it's enough for you. Since your ears are free, you are one of the only people to hear the change as the power rolls off, but everyone sees the lights snap to solar mode, feels the train stop dead.

"It's a brown out," someone says.

"We know," a bored-looking kid mumbles.

He is wearing a t-shirt that says THE SKY IS STILL BLUE.

You close your eyes, trying to remember the three years of your childhood when the blues and rose-pinks and coppers weren't washed out. It might be your memories. It might be a movie you saw in school. You open your eyes. The train is outside. The sky is still white.

□ Weed □ Re-shelve □ Mark for review in next weeding cycle

\* \* \*

"Oh my god, not again."

Rachel rolls her eyes at me, but her smile is indulgent. She thinks my collection makes me quirky. Maybe she craves that. Her family is decent enough, but minimalist covers everything about them—their decor, their emotions, their worldview. Her mom had a hiccuping fit when we hacked holes in the knees of Rachel's school uniform. She's the type who only gets experiences curated by the buyers at Holts or Dhana. To be honest, I'm not sure Rachel would even know where the library is if it weren't for me.

The discard bin is filled with dozens of jewel-like tabs. I scan them with my Phob, looking for keywords and tags that excite me. Not just salacious stuff.

momentous

farewell

holiday

match-three

disabled

controversial  
fashion  
theft  
basketball  
murder  
reality  
geo-engineering

I gather them in a bin provided by the library. It has the name of the branch stamped on it, though a few letters have been rubbed off. Rachel snaps a picture of me holding the bin, probably to post on her Snario later. Now it's my turn to roll my eyes. She has over a million followers and I don't love being her token plebe.

"Buy this one. It's pink."

I'm almost at my budget, but I add it without scanning it. It'll be a surprise.

The old librarian behind the counter starts to count my tabs, then waves their hand, a sort of generous dance.

"Just give me three."

I hover my Phob over the scanner and sweep the tabs into my pocket. I want to go home and upload the first one right away, but I let Rachel feel up scarves in the gift shop and capture another Snario before hopping on the subway back to my family's unit.

## Alicorn 2108

A.M. Matte

By the fifth month of the three hundred twenty-third earth year, Loewen began to feel restless. It occurred to her that she could end it all by pressing the yellow button of each incubator, one by one.

The yellow button, ensconced under transparent glass, was to be pressed only if an incubator defaulted and its inhabitant ceased to produce life signs. Loewen had pressed the yellow buttons of half a dozen incubators since the journey began. She'd muttered a rudimentary prayer at each occasion, shedding a tear only once—it had been Verity's incubator, after all.

Loewen had pledged her eternal devotion to the Reëm because of Verity. If a human were ever allowed to be in love with a Reëm, Loewen had been in love with Verity. It was a chaste love, a pure, platonic love—one that Loewen once dreamed could be reciprocal. Though she knew it would be difficult for a Reëm, even an evolved and open-minded one like Verity, to deign to feel more than condescension for one not of their realm.

Loewen had felt so ashamed when she first met Verity, so unworthy. Verity had manifested herself in her simplest form: a small, golden unicorn, no larger than a goat, and Loewen had recognized her immediately; a mysterious creature lored to introduce itself only to wise kings and to virtuous virgins. Loewen, to her dismay, was neither, having been unwise enough to allow Wils to lure her into the blacksmith foundry where he unceremoniously ravished the one he purported to love.

Verity found Loewen sobbing near the village brook, mourning her lost maidenhood and innocence; never would she trust a man—anyone—again.

Recognizing Loewen's anguish, Verity had approached gently, her hooves barely causing a whisper in the grass, to kneel next to the stricken girl. Loewen had heard stories of unicorns and how their proud spirits could never be tamed, their fierce strength never be harnessed, except by a virgin. When Verity rested her head on Loewen's lap, the young girl could not hold back a cry of disgust—

how could she allow this majestic creature to lower herself to her soiled, broken level?

“I see your soul,” a disembodied fairy voice echoed in Loewen’s head. “I know you. No mortal fate shall strike you. You are destined for far further than you can dream.”

In time, Loewen became used to the unicorn’s telepathic communication and she was allowed to meet the rest of the Reëm as they arrived in the area from distant lands.

Verity was her champion, defending her to the partly hostile, mostly indifferent beings as they prepared to set sail across the stars. Loewen was both confused and eager about her new role.

“We require a caretaker,” explained Verity. “Our incumbent chose long ago to integrate herself into earth nature.”

“Take me with you, I’ll do whatever you ask,” Loewen committed with no thought to long-term consequence.

The debate raged, but Loewen was elevated to the rank of Reëm caretaker. In exchange for eternal youth and immortality: servitude. But the idea of leaving a dreary existence and base needs behind was too tempting. Flying among the stars with all human knowledge in her grasp was the epitome of freedom. Loewen boarded the Reëm ship as soon as they had all gathered for the journey. Loewen was so grateful—so in love, still—that the novelty of communing with the ethereal beasts, of needing neither nourishment nor sleep, of having only time at one’s disposal, didn’t wear off for some years. The initial gnawing at her stomach, as it got used to being empty, disappeared, and she filled her endless night with the literature and music of the world she’d left.

Verity’s promise of teaching her to read all languages and giving her access to everything ever written had sealed the matter. From her mother, Loewen had heard of Tesselschade Visscher and had longed to know more about the female Dutch writer. But her father disapproved of educating his daughters; after all, his wife had been able to read and her learning hadn’t saved her from typhus.

Loewen had hoped that, once married and no longer under her father’s authority, Wils would have allowed her to learn to read and even acquire a book or two. Looking back, Loewen realised that Wils,

despite his promises, would never have sanctioned her elevating herself above him. A blacksmith's apprentice didn't need his letters; neither would his wife.

Where she'd once yearned to read and own one book, Loewen now had all of time to enjoy all of humankind's creations. She'd begun with Visscher and Vondel, her countrymen, but quickly moved on to the Greeks and the writings of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty period. Then, for an entire year, with Vivaldi's Lute Concerto in D Major in perpetual loop, Loewen read everything earthlings had gathered on the Reëm, chuckling at their naiveté. Even Leonardo da Vinci was mistaken: "The unicorn, through its intemperance and not knowing how to control itself, for the love it bears to fair maidens, forgets its ferocity and wildness; and laying aside all fear it will go up to a seated damsel and go to sleep in her lap, and thus the hunters take it."

Of course, how could he know that the otherworldly Reëm had avowed humans unsuitable of dominating other species on earth? That only a handful of Reëm allowed themselves to be seen and, even then, rarely in the same form? That as powerful as the Reëm were, they were too few to counter the devastating effects of humanity on the natural world that harboured them?

Loewen took pride in her selection to accompany the Reëm on the next leg of their journey. She felt empowered by the knowledge she acquired over the centuries. But she also felt the weight of the solitude of having no one with whom to share her thoughts—except the memory of a long-departed kindred soul. Truth be told, mourning Verity had taken its toll to the point where Loewen now perceived shirking her caretaking duties as entertainment.

If she did press all the yellow buttons, she would start with Hapathtich's. The alpha female, who had vehemently opposed Loewen's designation as caretaker, would have to go first. If any Reëm survived Loewen's assault, she could claim a general malfunction; but Hapathtich would know the truth. Her fiery auburn mane would flicker and twitch as she scrutinized her prey. If she judged it innocent, she'd turn away without further thought. If Hapathtich saw before her the guilty, however, she'd spear through it with her horn, regardless, Loewen was sure, of any immortality bestowed upon the judged.

Loewen could therefore make sense of the fact that, after a millennium of disappointed struggle to protect animals from humans, Hapathtich had repatriated the Reëm on earth to venture to a world more deserving of their help. Loewen could not, however, understand why such a fierce and powerful being as Hapathtich would render herself vulnerable to a mechanical glitch, or to the whim of a restless human.

Until the fifth month of the three hundred twenty-third year of the voyage.

Only then did Loewen grasp that immortality was a penance, a tool to render her a slave, and not the gift she imagined. It broke her heart to think that Verity would have tricked her, bribed her into this life, this non-life of solitary exploration of a finite collection of human art, literature and music. She'd given up her freedom, literally for a song.

The Reëm knew better than to give up finity. Extended longevity, yes; immortality, no.

Life was too precious to render limitless.

Loewen stood before Hapathtich's incubator, her hand hovering over the case that protected the Reëm leader's yellow termination button. It would be easy to throw away the covenant she had with the Reëm. More specifically, with Verity.

"You will see—once on the other side, I will emerge and show you a new world. One with an amethyst sky."

Another promise unkept.

Loewen's nose prickled. She hadn't cried in a long time—she consumed nor produced no water—but this time, a tear formed and slid down her cheek. What would life be like, at their destination, without Verity's guidance and friendship? Loewen didn't want to contemplate it. Her hand lifted the case, which emitted a slight squeak as if to announce Hapathtich's imminent death, then slammed it down again.

Loewen didn't want to end Hapathtich's life; she wanted Hapathtich to end *hers*. And not because she'd sent her brethren to their rest; because she'd served them well. Loewen experienced relieved contentment as she came to this conclusion. A simple

solution; a simple request. One that honoured Verity's faith in her.

Loewen returned to her archive station and selected the 2nd movement of Vivaldi's lute concerto. Only 16,060 more nights before she could wake her hosts for the landing and plead for death.

## Monsters

Zachery Cooper

Our headlamps flicker off  
the cave wall's slow trickle,  
thin rivulets that weave rock  
and shimmer like diamonds.

I look up instead of down  
and discover six cave crickets,  
wide and wiry as a child's hand,  
stitched like black mesh  
on the cracked concave  
above.

Dim halos of light trigger a silent  
scurry left, then right—a two-step  
that defies gravity.

I marvel at the crickets'  
stick-to-it-ness, how  
half a dozen black pearl eyes  
gleam in the light we carry  
into what we thought  
was a dark, lifeless  
cave. *What monsters,*  
the crickets must think  
as we whisper  
the same words  
in their home.



## **Cocaine Birds**

Zachery Cooper

Their mythos known only to those who  
walk among shadows cast in night's  
spray. They nest on the border  
of imagination, just before insanity's  
endless roundabout.

Their wings flap with hurricane force  
next to ears, you shoo them  
away with catapult fingers.

These elusive birds haunt weary-eared  
birders with their coarse croons off  
crow's caw, masked in sparrow & chickadee's  
fluid music. The lonely alchemist  
hums their song like a mantra;  
knows not everyone is given ears  
to hear it.

**A few more lines**

Louise Carson

Does a small bird worry at, define, his shape of language?  
And does a rogue honeybee polish her elbows, cross her knees,  
recline on a shiny leaf to criticize the other bee dances?

Poet of the louche walks a black dog.  
Poet who is a dew-cooled cobweb stretched over grass.  
They open today.

**Milfoil**

Judith Skillman

We remember slime between our toes,  
the squishy mud far down  
below a roof could be a grave  
depending on breath, how long  
it could be held, and in that sky-blue place  
the flutter kick, light sifting down  
to our prison world—we girls—  
poor seconds, *do you have ants in your pants*,  
as uncle would say  
and yes we were impatient  
waiting for dinner to end  
so the lake could take us back in its tentacles  
floating close to the surface  
like the hair of Ophelia, an acquaintance  
closer than the closest friend.

## Beast

Savanna Scott Leslie

It is a cold and craggy swath of forest that lies near the northeastern border of the province and belongs, nominally, to the queen. The snow has thawed except for scattered mounds of soil-stained white that the swelling temperature has turned to sharp-edged crystal. In the air hangs a dampness that seeps through coats and boots, pressing in to overwhelm the skin. More than renewal, spring here brings violent mutation. These woodlands are not reborn. Instead, they deck themselves with vulgar senescence like a hag out of folk stories. And once they have adorned themselves, they beckon you to revel in their wild ugliness.

Beauty flirts always with the foul, and so it is no stranger to these woods. You can find it in the pale-faced trilliums whose delicate shoots rise up from beds of desiccated leaves. And there is beauty, too, in the copper mist that rises from the lakes to haunt the pines and cedars in the morning, when daylight is weakest but most unrelenting. These are the baubles that hang from the crone's crooked neck. They might catch the eye, but they can't distract from the sun-bleached, rotting trunks that protrude from the swamp at weird angles, the musk and excrement of unseen predators, or the maggot-ridden corpses of prey.

Since childhood, I have abhorred the place. For years, I have avoided it, preferring the rolling fields of the south with their sleek, industrial windmills that lick like white tongues at an unbroken sky. But the past drags me backward, and I have returned to the north as if reeled in on a spool hidden at the very centre of the woods. I set out through the tree line, where the grasses stop. I see the wide mirror of the lake through a screen of ghost-pale birches just beginning to bud. It isn't long, pressing on into the half-forgotten wilderness, before I sense that I am not alone. By the time I enter the fetid swamp, I feel the presence. The hairs at the back of my neck bristle at the pinpricks of unseen eyes. I ascend the rocky hillside to the denser, older forest. Primeval stillness reigns.

Above, the fragrant needles of white firs splay together into a canopy. Below, lichen clings to shale-grey rock amid a litter of fallen needles where nothing grows but weeping fungus. At the base of the trees, the stunted, jagged branches leave a wide if menacing berth. This splintered landscape is cunning; when you shift your weight, the inky

spaces between the trunks eddy and shift. Then, when you walk on, picking a sinuous path to avoid the sharp branches, the forest churns sickeningly in every direction—the background lurching forward as the foreground recedes. As I wander on, in the gaps between those firs, the blur of movement augurs terrible change.

How strange is my calm as I venture deeper into the muskeg. The lengthening shadows point the way, and I feel the resignation that comes to the condemned as they step up to the gallows. A quickening has come over me. I draw a sharp breath of cold, stale air. My whole life, I have found in death and dying a morbid attraction—the brazen seduction of violence, of surrender and defeat. Even as I shudder, a part of me is stirring from a long sleep. I can feel this lower self inside me, writhing and mewling, crying out to be born. Its essence seeps like tree sap along the channels of my bones. Its presence resonates with the wild's decadent menace, attuning my body to the being hidden among the firs. It compels me to press on. Bluebeard's wife must have savoured this same stimulation as she stepped into the cellar and gasped at its doom. There is relief in resignation; to taste it is to be spellbound. *Submit*, says the ego when the evil eye bestows its curse. *Yield*, says the spirit when the runes are cast. *Command*, says the virgin when the wizard marks her with his arcane word.

Bewitched, my heart drums its dual rhythms of fear and anticipation as I walk on. Hoarse voices rise up in obscene chorus through the underbrush of long-dead brambles and broken, husky stalks. A haunting insect whine joins the cacophony and I shiver, dizzy in grasping the folly of escape. There is fear in me, but it is outdone by my craving. I long for the encounter that the shifting firs have foreordained. Too late to escape this backwater. I will never free myself, and I don't care—I ache. My soul perches on a precipice above a vast expanse of purple, yearning to sink.

On wobbly knees, I crest the hill. A few paces more and I stop short before a stagnant pool. A froth of cream-coloured scum outlines the oblong basin, and it is teeming with frogs and toads, all croaking in unison with their thousand eyes upon me. Black-flies, gnats, mosquitoes—like a fog of terrible angels they descend from the trees. Their keening falls to diminuendo as the amphibians gobble them up. The chorus gives way to a din of gluttony as scores of wet maws gurgle and gulp. Tiny stomachs gorge themselves on bitter, bloodless meat.

The force that has drawn me here lies in the black muck beneath

the water. It is the forest's eldritch heart. Now my body jerks forward, quivering. I arch my back and crane my neck to steal a final look at the indifferent sky. I see a perfect circle of cloud and star cut into the canopy. Tears drip into my ears, slide into my hair. And as I approach the centre of the pool, I close my eyes. I lower my chin. The icy water has risen up past my ankles. It has soaked into my shoes. When my body stops creeping forward, my eyes open. My ragged breath has calmed.

The eyes that stare back at mine bear the double-keyhole pupils of a goat. The irises are the near-black of the loamy soil where centipedes sleep. The colours ripple gently, like tendrils of algae clinging to river-stones. The creature's ears are tufted like a cat's while its boxy muzzle and liver-coloured nose are canine. Its carnivorous teeth protrude through wet lips, and I can feel its breath on my face. The beast stands on its hind legs, tall and naked. Its genitals hang between sinewy haunches and it smells of musk and rot and filth. I swallow the bile that has flooded my mouth.

"Please," I stammer. My voice is like the hollow recording of an echo. The creature growls, low and hideous, and a hundred words buffet my tongue like the wings of birds trapped against plate glass windows. All their syllables dissolve. I can only whisper the same entreaty. "Please. Please. Please."

Now there is a shift. Time empties its stomach into the pool. The toads and frogs go quiet like the insects. I press my hands to the sides of my face. I feel coarse mats of oily fur beneath the firm pads of my forepaws. I taste rotten meat, and I snarl so fiercely that my ribcage shakes with sound. I dig my claws into the great dome of my scalp and feel my blood's hot trickle against my spring-chilled hide.

Before me, in the murky water, stands a shivering woman. Her face is familiar, but her blue eyes are strange.

**Stick Guy**  
Bailey Bjolin

“I can’t believe we haven’t been here yet,” Lynden cracks a peanut shell between their fingers, coaxes the tawny nut from the shards, and slips it between their teeth. They crunch down, chasing the peanut with a swig from the bottle. “Want some?” They shake it in my direction.

I decline; my head’s already fuzzed from a few too many sips of whiskey. From our little camping spot on the bluff, we have a commanding view of the bay. I look down at the diamond water sparkling in the evening light; the waves lapping on the shore have a faraway sound. Across the bay, nestled between a thatching of towering firs, a collection of holiday homes stare out at us with their lantern eyes. I wonder, vaguely, what they see.

For months now, ever since we’ve moved to the island, we’ve heard stories about a beautiful little campsite on the ocean, a secluded place that only the locals know about. I don’t remember exactly when I first heard of it; like so many small-community mythologies, it can be difficult to pinpoint the exact moment of knowing. Certainly, Lynden and I are intrigued. Not only because we relish the idea of a perfect night spent out in the woods, but also because knowing the location of the campsite is a signal of something bigger, a sign that we, too, belong here.

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It’s with some surprise that Lynden bursts through the door one day after work, yelling, “I know where it is!” from the doorway.

“You know where what is?” I yell back. Lynden bounds up the stairway two steps at a time and strides into the kitchen, where I’m filling the kettle at the sink. They pull off their sweater, mussing their short, brown hair in the process, and throw it on the chair in the sitting room. They wrap their arms around me from behind and bury their head into my neck.

“Horsetail Bay,” they say, their words feathery on my skin. A slow thrill travels down my spine. I turn off the tap and twist my head around until our faces are close, our noses almost touching.

“How?” I ask.

Lynden kisses me quick and cracks a smile, eyes crinkling behind their tortoiseshell glasses. “The new guy, Miles. He found it last week. Apparently he was driving around looking for firewood and

he just stumbled across it.”

“He just found it? Isn’t it supposed to be super-secret or something?”

Lynden releases me and steps back, allowing me to set the kettle on the stove. They shrug. “Dunno, but he said he took a trail down to the beach and there was a sign or something, so—seems legit?”

The kettle begins its simmering rumble. I look to Lynden, a sort of excitement spreading through me. These early-summer evenings are warm and endless, and it’s been weeks since we broke out the tent.

“Well, in that case,” I say, inching closer again, snaking my hand around their neck and drawing them in, “we should start packing.”

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We decide to go the next evening, a Friday. Lynden reassures me that it’s a short walk from the road to the camping spot, so we pack haphazardly, not bothering with our usual essentials. I dress for our excursion in my favourite thrifted skirt that falls just below my knees and leave my hair down for once, admiring the way it curls just below my shoulders. It’s hardly camping attire, but then again, we’re just going overnight.

We drive up-island until the road narrows and begins to wind, sloughing off the cozy beachhouses and summer homes until it’s nothing but solid, heavy forest on all sides. Occasionally the forest opens up like a wound to reveal old logging operations, alders and juvenile cedars vying for precious sunlight as the older growth watches over them like a sentry.

We turn at an intersection onto gravel road, kicking up dust in our wake.

“You gonna roll that up?” Lynden asks, eyeing my window.

“No,” I reply, making a face at them. “It’s almost all the way closed. Besides, I’ll get carsick.” I look through the rearview mirror and watch the afternoon sun shafting through the swirling dust. The road is utterly empty behind us.

I lose track of the turns Lynden makes, lulled by the forest slipping by and the sweet summer breeze filtering through the window. The car slows at the end of a road and I peer into the forest uncertainly.

“How do you know this is it?” I ask, searching for evidence of a trail.

“Miles said it’d be at the end of Hilltop Road,” Lynden replies,



glancing at me to roll up the window before they shut off the car. I realize I've been so distracted by the forest I haven't noticed the street signs, which feel all but incongruous in a place like this.

We haul out our gear and Lynden locks the car. I shoot them a funny look.

"There's no one even here," I say, realizing how petty I sound. Hardly anyone locks their doors on the island, much less their cars. But Lynden shrugs, pocketing their keys.

"It just makes me feel better, ok?"

We scan the forest for a moment, standing on the road looking in. Behind our car we notice a small dirt path snaking up into an opening in the pines. Lynden takes the lead, slinging the tent bag over their shoulder. I'm stuck with the cooler, a small, shitty thing I won at a company Christmas party some years back. It bumps against my thigh with each awkward step, and I feel like my leg is slowly being tenderized in the process. I hoist my backpack over my opposite shoulder, hoping the path to the bay is as short as promised.

The air cools as soon as we step off the road. We step into a shallow ditch before climbing a few short metres back into the mouth of the path. Lynden pauses at the small crest and looks into the forest, squinting behind their small, circular glasses. "There's totally something here," they say, stepping under the low-hanging bows and all but disappearing from view. I duck to follow them, but not before turning back to look at the car, the empty, dead-end road, and the golden light falling all around.

And then the forest envelops us.

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The forest is grey-dark and gloomy already, even though by all accounts it's still early evening. I can taste the ocean on my tongue, and slices of light shaft through the distant trees ahead of us. Sparrows and other small birds zip around us as we walk, eager for the small flies we attract in our wake.

A few minutes' walking, and we reach the top of a small hill. The path narrows and drops straight down for a few metres before flattening out and gently easing us the rest of the way with a few switchbacks. Soon, the dirt path grows sandy beneath my feet. We walk out from the trees and into a quiet bay, set deep into the island. I welcome the warm setting sun on my face and kick off my flip-flops to dig my toes into the sand.

Lynden is several steps ahead of me, having tossed their bags on the sand and raised their hands in the air like a person giving thanks. I am caught in the wonder of where we are, the remoteness of it. Lynden disappears from view around a bend in the trees while I step out towards the water. The tide is in that dubious state where I cannot tell whether it's going in or out. I let the water lap at my toes and I bend periodically to check for shells along the shore.

"Uh, Jo," Lynden's voice breaks through my meditation. I follow the sound of their voice, pocketing a handful of welks until I find them, staring at a sign that's been nailed to a slim piece of driftwood set upright in the sand. It looks like someone's written the words: NO CAMPING NO FIRES in charcoal.

"Weird sign," I plant myself beside Lynden, casting them a sidelong glance.

"Must be a gag that someone put up," Lynden says, "to keep this place from being overrun by tourists."

"Well, they should've used something more permanent than charcoal." I touch my finger to the lettering and come away with a black-smudged fingertip. I wiggle my finger in Lynden's face.

"Don't you dare," Lynden says, right as I swipe their nose with my finger. They yell and pull me to them, wrapping their arms around me and pinning my own arms to my sides. They plant kisses all along the back of my neck and I laugh and try to twist myself free, but Lynden's grip is strong. We stagger around for a while and collapse onto the sand in a heap.

"Where should we set up camp?" I ask, my head on Lynden's stomach.

"Somewhere up there?" Lynden nods their head back towards the forest, above the high-tide line.

I sit up and look back. "Could do." I scan the edge of the beach until I see a rocky outcropping that pokes out from the trees. "I bet that'd make a good campsite," I say, pointing.

At the foot of the bluff we find a steep path tucked away to the side.

"See?" I say, triumphant. Lynden looks dubious.

The scramble is short and easy, though my flip-flops aren't built for this kind of terrain. Standing at the top of the bluff, our view of the bay stretches all the way out to the ocean. The water below us reflects the bluest sky, now beginning to yellow along the edges where the

treetops touch it.

“You’ve gotta admit,” I say, “it doesn’t get much better than this.”

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Something is bugging me about my view of the bay. Lynden’s facing out towards the ocean, so they can’t see it, but every time I look over their shoulder my eye snags on something below us, near where we first emerged on the beach. A long, dark smudge runs up along the trunk of a bare pine tree that borders the beach, perhaps evidence of some old fire or a patch of disease. I hadn’t noticed when we walked in—probably, it was hidden from view. In any case, when I cast my gaze broadly over the bay, that long smudge seems to morph in the corner of my eye until I am convinced I’m seeing the shadow of someone standing at the edge of the forest, someone long and bent at an odd angle, neck much too long and arms akimbo. Every time I see it, my heart skips a little, until I remember that it’s just a shadow on a tree, a trick of the light, a tangle of inebriation and some old biological carryover that predisposes me to see danger in every shadow and unexpected movement.

After the third or fourth time of seeing the false figure, I pluck the bottle from Lynden’s hand. “Hey!” they scrunch their face into a frown. Their blue eyes are twinkling, unfocused. “I thought you didn’t want any.”

“Yeah, well,” I force myself to take a long pull from the bottle. The whiskey’s chemical burn stings my throat and makes my eyes water. I hand it back, grimacing.

“We could have brought beer, you know.”

“Yeah, maybe we should’ve.”

A silence stretches between us. I reach for the bag of peanuts but all that’s left are husks. Lynden tilts their head, ever so slightly to the side, as though listening to a sound I cannot hear. From across the bay, we hear an owl calling, *who-cooks-for-you, who-cooks-for-you-now*. Lynden meets my eyes and their gaze almost melts off their face, into a familiar, gooey expression I see when they are thinking romantic things. But then it fractures, and they’re giggling into their sleeve and stumbling to their feet. I catch a mumbled, “need to pee,” before they disappear into the forest behind me.

The forest snaps with Lynden’s footsteps, and I wonder what kind of bushes they are massacring with their boots. Flies buzz in the

falling sunlight and frogs croak somewhere below us. I'm transfixed by the first star in the sky, high above me.

After several long minutes, the forest crackles to life again.

"What're you doing in—" I start, but my words catch in my throat when I see Lynden's face in the trees. Their expression is off, somehow, eyes round behind their glasses. They stumble and almost fall into my lap, twisting immediately to stare into the forest.

"Did you see anything?" they ask. I can feel their body tense against mine,

"What? What are you talking about?" I run my hands across Lynden's shoulders but they push me away, pitching their weight forward until they're almost curled in on themselves.

"I think I saw someone in there," they say.

My first reaction is to laugh, but something ices through me. "What the fuck? Lynden, are you trying to scare me?"

"It was like a guy was running towards me—"

"Lynden—"

"Holding a stick or something."

This time I do laugh, and the echo mocks me from across the bay. Lynden startles and turns to look at me. I watch their expression ripple from surprise to fear. I bite back my laugh.

"Are you sure it wasn't a deer or something?"

Lynden hesitates. I continue. "I mean, it's about eight hundred times more likely to be a deer around here than some weirdo with a stick. Right?"

Lynden nods and licks their lips. "I dunno. It really—I really thought it looked like someone." they pause, their gaze fixated on the forest. "But you're right," they say at last, "it's probably a deer."

In all our years together, I've never seen Lynden spooked like this. I swallow my own burgeoning fear and stand, the ground wobbling ever-so-slightly beneath my feet.

I try to speak slowly, as though I am talking to a child. "Okay, would you feel better if we went and looked for the deer? We can make some noise, scare it up? And then you can see that there's nothing weird in the forest and your mind was just playing tricks on you."

Lynden's eyes widen. I reach out my hand and help them up, hoping they can't see through my bravado. I've never been the courageous one between us. I give them a small kiss on the cheek and dare a grin. "If it *is* some guy out there, we can yell at him to fuck off."

Lynden doesn't react, but I can't let it deter me; we have to move before I lose my nerve. I almost have to pull Lynden into the cool half-dark of the forest. We stand at the threshold peering in, as evening birds chirrup in stereo around us.

Nothing stirs. I realize I'm holding my breath. Several seconds pass before I release it, daring a few tentative steps deeper into the forest. If I squint I can see the path that Lynden beat through the bush earlier, a blunt line disappearing between two salal bushes. Glancing back at Lynden, who is still standing at the edge of the forest looking in with an almost sheepish expression on their face, I bring my hands together and clap twice.

"Hey, deer!" I yell into the forest. The trees seem to catch my voice in their branches and hold it there, dampening the sound. I reach out and shake the salal and let out a few woops, like I would for bears. "Hey! Deer! Show yourself!"

As if in response, something shifts between the trees, something just out of view. I can hear branches cracking beneath its feet, two bright, successive snaps. "Hey, deer!" I yell again, craning to make out the source of the noise in the gloom. I look back to Lynden, conjuring some wry observation about harassing deer in my head, but the look on their face, grainy in the dusky light, is raw and terrified, what I would imagine an animal looks like when it's caught in a trap. Just then, the forest shatters into sound, and I turn to see something running through the bushes towards us.

My heart stops and I stumble backwards, my foot catching on a fallen branch. I fall and drag myself up in a blind flurry just in time to catch sight of Lynden disappearing onto the bluff. The crashing behind me intensifies as I throw myself out of the forest, smashing into our tent and yanking the pegs out of the rocky ground. I hear a pole snap and my elbow comes down hard on a rock under the nylon fabric. Then, somehow, Lynden is pulling me up by my sweater and putting themselves between me and the forest. They draw a pocketknife from their jeans, the one they use for meal prep when we go backpacking. They fumble with the tiny blade and drop it, cursing a steady stream of expletives as they grope for their knife.

The forest seems to sway for a moment, the huckleberry bushes that border the bluff shaking as though caught in an earthquake. I catch sight of a figure behind the outermost trees, the briefest flash of something tall—my panicked brain reads "upright"—holding what

looks like a slim pole held erect like a jousting staff. In an instant it's gone, the sound of its steps receding into the depths of the forest.

At once a numbness washes over me, coating my mouth in hot, gummy fuzz. My mind feels bright and clear and utterly sober. My heart is beating so hard in my chest that I can feel it everywhere; my fingers pulse with a manic, too-fast beat. I swear my hair is beating, too.

"What the *fuck was that?*" I manage. I feel like I'm going to throw up.

Lynden rips open the sagging tent and pulls out our sleeping bags and mats. "I don't fucking know, but we've got to get out of here." They shove their sleeping bag into their daybag and follow it with our used pots and camp stove.

"Jo!" They yell at me, "fucking let's go!"

I move without thinking, shoving food into the cooler, packing my backpack in two seconds flat. I'm struggling to understand what I saw. *It must be a deer*, I think to myself. *It couldn't possibly be anything else*. My scalp prickles. It sure didn't look like a deer.

"It had to be a deer, right, Lyn?" I follow Lynden down the bluff, picking my way down the steep, rocky path. More than once, my flip-flops slip on the loose gravel, and I curse myself for not wearing proper shoes.

"I dunno, did it *look* like a deer?" Lynden half-jogs along the beach, passing the NO CAMPING NO FIRES sign without even glancing at it. I struggle to catch up, the cooler beating an irregular tattoo against my leg. As I pass the sign I notice the dark smudge from earlier, now some dozen metres away. From this angle, I see it's larger than it looked from the bluff, its silhouette long and strange. It takes me a second to register the details, the fact that it looks *drawn on*, someone having peeled away the bark of the tree and sketched the figure with what looks like charcoal, filling in the body until it appeared as a swath of blackness. A sentinel standing watch over the beach.

"Lynden," I call, almost sprinting to catch up with them. Lynden stops short at the mouth of the pathway where it snakes into the forest, and I nearly run headfirst into the back of their pack.

"Well?" I ask, trying to control my breathing. The last of the summer sunset hits the back of my head, and I feel a chill creep up from the ocean and gather about my ankles. Lynden heaves a long

sigh, looks to me, and nods.

“Let’s go.”

We move quickly but without running, as if by some unspoken agreement that being quiet is more important than being fast. Lynden guides us with their phone light, which somehow feels both too dim and too bright all at once. I focus on the little weaving light in order to calm my nerves. The forest is a grey-dark all around us, but I do not dare look away from Lynden’s little light. *If I can’t see it, then I’m ok. I’m ok. It’s ok.* The words spin through my head on a loop, in line with my footsteps. The sound of my flip-flops slapping against the path is so loud, I can barely hear Lynden’s breathing ahead of me.

If I can’t *slap* see it *slap*, then I’m *slap* okay.

At the top of the hill we quicken our pace. Lynden’s long strides seem to span two of my own, and soon I find myself jogging along the path behind them.

It’s barely audible at first, a dubious sound that I might have mistaken for my own backpack rubbing against my sweater. But in a split second, Lynden breaks their stride to turn around, flashing their paltry light into the forest, and the sound transforms into a distinct cracking, something stepping in the darkness somewhere behind us.

In that instant, we become creatures driven entirely by instinct. We take off down the path, near blind, Lynden’s light swinging wild arcs ahead of us. As if in response, the crashing in the bushes quickens until it fills the forest with the sound of branches breaking and leaves shaking. Somewhere in front of me, Lynden stumbles and their light goes skittering across the path. Neither of us stops to pick it up. The sound from behind us is louder, even louder than before, coming up fast on our right-hand side. My cooler jerks my arm with its erratic momentum and bounces off the trunk of a nearby tree, cracking my knuckles between the plastic handle and its body. It flies from my hand and into the path, a mess of sound that tangles with the cacophonous darkness.

Without Lynden’s phone to guide us, we run towards the half-light that peeks out beyond the trees. Finally, I realize, we’re nearing the end of the path. I can hear something breathing behind me in ragged gasps and I realize that, whatever it is, it’s closer than I imagined. And then, something shifts: the sound of snapping of twigs and rustling of leaves disappears, replaced by a tight beat of footfalls on the path behind us, matching our own. *Footfalls.*

My mind is blank, so far beyond comprehension, so singularly focused on the growing dusk that welcomes us as we sprint towards the edge of the forest. So close now, Lynden a couple metres ahead of me, ducking under those same, low branches that first ushered us in. I can feel the footfalls beating the path behind me and urge myself to run faster, trying to remember how close the car is to the path. The gasping behind me is low and shallow, so close I think I can feel the heat of it on my ears.

I burst out of the forest and tumble down into the ditch, noticing that my feet are bare and bloodied; I must have lost my flip-flops in the mad sprint through the forest, but I can't remember it happening. I fly to the car and wrench at the passenger-side door, but it doesn't give. "Lynden!" I yell, registering them for the first time. "Lynden, where the fuck are the keys?"

Through the window, on the other side of the car, I can see Lynden patting down their pockets, a terrible look on their face. "Are you kidding me?" I scream at them, pulling the door handle over and over. Behind me, I hear something burbling in the darkness, on the edge of the forest. At first I can't tell exactly what it is, bird or animal or who-knows-what. But then I register something human, or human-like: a low, sputtering laugh. I fall to the ground against the car, still holding the door handle, and let out a sob.

Lynden's door rips open and the vehicle roars to life. I throw myself into the car and slam the door shut with so much force I'm afraid it might come off. Lynden fishtails, nearly careening into the ditch opposite the trailhead, but rights us at the last moment and speeds away.

"Found the keys," they say, between gasps. I burrow into the passenger seat and peek out the rear window. There, on the edges of the rear taillights, I catch a flash of movement, a tall figure, running along the edge of the road, something like a stick carried tall in its hands.





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**—K.S.Y.V.  
& S.K.**