

The English Course Union and The Continuist chose to collaborate with one another due to a shared passion for making writing and publishing accessible to all, not just those in the English program or with formal education. On Saturday, February 13, 2021 we held a writing workshop and performance night called Finding the Voice Within, encouraging X University creatives to look within themselves and explore the stories that demand to be told. The stories only they could tell. This zine is the culmination of that day. We hope we were able to encourage our creatives to continue working on their passions.

A special thank you to Dr. Lauren Kirshner for taking the time to teach us how to locate and explore our unique voices. A huge thank you to Agasha Kankunda, The Continuist's 2020-21 Graphic Design Director, for designing and preparing this zine for publication. Thank you to the Faculty of Arts and the Ryerson Liberal Arts Society for continuously supporting initiatives that enrich the academic and creative lives of our students. And, finally, thank you to all who participated and contributed your work. You are the reason this zine exists and why our groups do the work we do.

We hope you enjoy this incredible compilation of writings from X University students. This is **Finding the Voice**Within.

- The English Course Union and The Continuist









Faculty of Arts

#### CONTENT WARNING

The following pages contain descriptions or mentions of subject matter that may be triggering for some readers. This includes childhood trauma, violence, self-harm, and death.

We always want to ensure that your well-being and mental health are prioritized before anything else. Please proceed at your own discretion.

## The Feeling

Nicholas Vourakes

The Feeling emerged at the time of birth

An enchanting phenomenon that carried tremendous worth

Its embrace was constant and its presence predictable as the sun

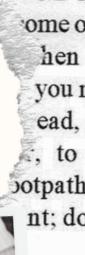
Until one day it vanished without a trace and went on the run

Attempts to describe it were always in fragments, its depth always precarious like the edges of glass

Once it even appeared in a dream until a sudden movement caused its comforting presence to fade into ash

As time went on, the consensus was that it was a myth or an urban legend which I was unable to prove or comprehend

Until the day I met her and felt her embrace, causing The Feeling to reemerge and my soul to fully ascend



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I've been running all night long
Slipping in and out of shifting crowds
Pedestrian footsteps treading in hasty
currents

I sweep through the sleepless wake
Digging gravel into soft soles
Sweet pavement licking raw knees
Catch my breath on the back of my heels
Suffocating with each lungful of respite
I haven't mourned the space you've left
In between my thoughts and breaths
Let me sink my teeth into the moon
Gnash the stars in my mouth
Soak my tongue and self in exuberance

Rowan LaCroix

### Meet Me in Isolation

### Kasia Halawa

The spring brought with it a strong wave of the virus and consequently a blur of identical days, virtual meetings, and an overall detachment from the outside sphere. So, when a coincidental swipe on a dating app held the promise of change, no matter how slight, I welcomed it unguarded.

He was a boy I met in boredom. No, not met. We never really met, although it felt like we had. A whirlwind of countless FaceTime calls, stories, voice recordings, laughs, and texts that then made me feel closer to him than anyone else in the world, yet almost 4000 miles kept us apart. He cycled to work in London, as I lay fast asleep, an ocean away. He woke up to my messages, 5 hours later I woke up to his responses. "I wish you were here," he'd say. "I wish I was, too," I'd reply.

I told him about my terrible neighbours, my dreams of screenwriting, and my fears about the future. He told me about his mischievous cat, his product design work, and his qualms over his career amidst pandemic precariousness. After hearing about his line of work, I jokingly asked him to make me a chair, and to my surprise he complied, sending designs with my name next to them. We planned a tour of London, whenever I was to be there, checking off those old red telephone

booths that he called boxes. I gave him my midnights; he gave me his 4 AMs. Together, we dreamed of vacations we could take after the travel ban lifted, that would bring us to the same place at the same time, plans that left me giddy with excitement.

One day, his messages changed. They grew shorter and far less frequent. He apologized the first few times after leaving me in deafening silence for days, but the apologies, alongside a vague mention of a personal matter, were soon also gone, and only silence remained. I grappled with my emotions, desperately trying to adjust to the absence of someone who was never mine to begin with, unconsciously drifting from anger to sadness to resentment. As my friends were visibly growing tired from hearing his name infiltrate every conversation, I made executive decisions. I eradicated Buddy Holly from my playlists, as it was he who once excitedly sent me his songs, I deleted Facetime screenshots, and left the season of that one Netflix show we were watching together, unfinished. I was surprised at how easy it was to slip back into the old familiarity of solitude.

As is often the case in life, a sudden change of plans interjected the listlessness that was growing stronger with each day. A family matter compelled me to book a last-minute flight to Europe. They were in Berkshire, just outside London. Yet, after all the times of wishing and willing me to be next to him, he would never know. Life and time are a fickle duo, proved by us in the same place, but apart. On that

trip, I forgot about the boy from quarantine, the one whose sweet words and innocent eyes placed me in the palm of his hand for an instant.

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tall.

I began to appreciate what we had for what it was — a temporary relief from the sheer stress of loneliness. I met him for a reason amidst the world in tumult. No, not met. We never really met, although I used to believe that one day we might. But I moved on enough that, months later when he would half-heartedly attempt to look for me in the same place he left me, I wouldn't be there. I think we were meant to be strangers, whose stories touched for just a fleeting second of one of life's seasons, for they converged at the cusp of summer, and by its end, had dissipated. What mattered was that, for a brief moment, we alleviated the weight of the world on each other's shoulders.

There is a sort of magic in two unlikely people crossing paths. As if everything stood against them and yet by some force, the universe still pushed them together. Out of all the possible scenarios and butterfly effects. And in spite of all the rules that govern chance, that declared they would forever remain strangers, their lives intertwined even if just for a little while.



# The Room

## Priyanthi Paramananthan

Am I dead? Is this heaven or hell? Or an untold alternative place no one has spoken of? How...where am I? With lethargic eyelids weighing a pound each, lifting them feels like it'll take an eternity before they can get into focus. A bit of resilience allows me to grasp unevenly painted walls splitting green to white, a project unfinished but who knows from which side. Okay, let's get up off the floor and see where I am and how I got to wherever this is. Breathe...one...two...three, up! I swear I felt my muscles flexing as hard as they can but I'm still here. On this rough carpet I stay, I suppose. What the heck happened to me. With my body feeling numb and frozen, I can still feel my sweat crawling down my face like little ants and the carpet piercing my skin as if I were sleeping on razors. I don't remember getting here or even this entire day. But before I can even sort a mindmap, a buzz of interruption. Wait hold on...a literal static, a buzz making my head turn to butter. The impossibility of tuning out the storm puts me on a growing edge.

Zzzzzzzzzzz...

Tick, tick, tick...

Hummm...buzzz...humm...

Every single sound coming from all over glistens in my ears, crystal clear as if on a speaker. I don't ever remember my hearing being this distinct. Amidst the tensions and busyness in my mind I forget about shifting my gaze to the sides to discover an ill patterned blur to the right corner which may be a couch and on the left a stack of records on a shelf or at least I assume it to be so.

I lay here with heightened hearing and declined vision, in a paralysis of my body and mind, unable to break out of this loop of uncertainty.

### heartstrings and pearls of memory

# Par Nicole Bernard

We were young once, passing golden summer days by spinning until we were sick. The sun kissed your cheek as you laughed and fell. Leaning back on one arm, you gazed up towards a kaleidoscope sky. Once I saw a tear—glistening opalescent—glide down your cheek. I longed to reach out and wipe it away but my hands were filled with torn—up blades of grass. Your head rested on my lap as I made you a flower crown. We were open and vulnerable for the first and only time. I forgot about that for years.

You rise unbidden in my thoughts. I go for walks and hum along to the radio and I can't stop thinking of you. We were joined at the hip, outrageous and wildly full of life. A part of me belonged to you, or at least I like to think so. How many times did I hazard a forlorn glance or caress your cheek?

They say that these are the best years of your life. I should be going out dancing and drinking with friends. I was supposed to find someone by now, to settle down and start my career. Another night passes at the campus pub drowned in cheap beer and meted out by solo games of billiards. The table is askew and the cues are uneven; perfection is such a rarity these days. Perhaps it only exists in the rose-tint of nostalgia.

This string of one-night stands and lonely mornings is purgatory. My nightmares always end in scattered pearl necklaces reminiscent of black-and-white murder mysteries. There's a cheap appeal to consuming old media, watching actors and dreams that died long before I was born. The jackknife snags across my memories as I try to fit you into a box.

At the top of my closet is a ragged shoebox filled with memories of you. I can rattle off its contents without so much as a glance: a snowglobe bought on the Chicago pier, a bulletin from a Tchaikovsky concert, a book inscribed with love notes, and your old swim-team hoodie. The smell of you wafts into my nostrils, reviving the memory of summers spent at your cottage jumping off the docks, swimming to the other side of the lake, and sharing banana popsicle kisses. I thought those days would stretch on forever, but I've learned that everyone has a breaking point. One day we were close as velcro and the next you ripped away from me. If only we had just been friends. Then I would have you here. I could run my fingers through your hair and gaze lovingly into your eyes again. Our love was so unadulterated back then.

We ran into each other at the mall once. Your brother called me a slut. You didn't say a word.

I've never been good at expressing myself, and feelings are always the hardest. You were a falling star burning bright across my vision. How could I even begin to describe my love for you? I faltered, and when it finally came out you had moved across the country for school.

You were my pilgrimage. I begged for you to lay blessings across my skin. Now I enshroud those remnants to lay in a tomb of my own construction. I long for the day to come when they resurrect you from my rib and our love story rises from the seeds of its destruction.

## Bottled Hyacinths

#### Sophia (Thanh-Thi) Nguyen

Cold linoleum, paint slick walls. Condensation runs down them, hotel room sweating bullets. The glass table bites his bare forearms. Henry crunches down on his fountain pen's metal barrel, the knurled grip setting his teeth on edge. Ink smeared messily across the desk, rubbed translucent. His fingerprints stand criminally out against the glass ink bottle. Hyacinth, the label said.

The phone rings: once, twice, three times. Scars across his palm catch awkwardly against the phone's base, its yellowed cord curled around his finger. Crushed velvet curtains flutters in a limp breeze. Someone's idea of dressing the place up.

Cheap hotel stationary bled, ink feathering. He scribbles confessions, crosses them out. His leg bounces beneath the desk, rattling the tabletop. His tweed suit jacket is splayed across the bed. A black leather suitcase, matching black leather belt: both heavy with silver snaps, both creased and well worn. He thought it'd make him look the proper part of a professor. White collar husband. Sweat runs down his temples. His tongue darts out, licks dry lips. Below, a watery, pale faced reflection stares up from the polished Oxfords he'd broken in just so. He can't bear to hold eye contact for too long. He's worried what it might say to him.

When Michael picks up, he nearly cries from relief. Henry's voice rumbles from his chest, low- rasped around the edges of Michael's name. It breaks halfway through. Michael hums, static crackling through the phone line: a brightness in his voice. Like he's been waiting for it all day, like he's played it out a million different ways in his head.

Their games of telephone tag always set Henry alight. The thrill of secreting off to take covert calls, half lidded gazes and faux apologetic excuses, thin and flimsy. Adrenaline souring his mouth, heart fluttering like a schoolboy with his first crush. As if they wanted to be caught.

Vanessa doesn't know.

Henry thinks sometimes about wanting to whisper it into the shell of her ear, when she is fast asleep. He can picture himself smoothing her dark hair out of the way, fanned against the pillow. Leaning in close, breath warming her neck: honey, I have the most divine conversations with another man. Other times, he thinks his heart would seize in his chest if it came out. Drop down dead from sheer embarrassment.



He doesn't tell her. He entertains the possibility, discards it, picks it up again, turns it over in his hands. At breakfast, she smiles at him with guileless eyes. When he washes the dishes, he can taste the smokiness of bacon and acidity of the eggs regurgitating back up. Vomit burns the back of his tongue. He swallows it: silent, complicit.

They talk into the late hours of night. Until his eyes burn, his body heavy: joints crunching like packing peanuts. Until Michael has to go. He's always the one to pull away—so sorry, until next time, yours. Henry lets him go silently, eyes darkened with grief. All he wants to do is hold him close. Everything he's ever let go of has scars from his fingers digging in, catching against flesh. Clawing down to bone.

The pale strip of skin wrapped around his ring finger haunts him. For a moment, he wants to swallow his wedding ring: imagines the cold clink of metal clicking against his teeth, the weight of it in his throat, pushed down. He closes his eyes, fingers folding around the ring in his pocket. His palms are sweating.

Henry slumps in the office chair. It creaks, groans-offers up an empathetic litany. He feels wrung clean. When his eyes open, they're hollowed grey, washed out. Pallid like a dead thing. He only feels alive in the push and pull of these hotel nights-Michael leaving as quickly as he comes. His wife doesn't know. She wouldn't want to, anyways. That settles that.

One question lingers. Were the bottled hyacinths blue, or purple? Henry couldn't tell, even as he ran his fingers through the inky dredges. The Victorians would know. Constancy, sorrow—both kissing, teeth clacking—until you couldn't extricate one from the other.



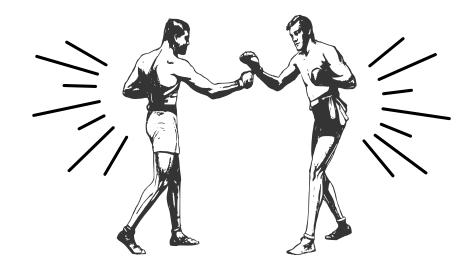
#### Alyssa Kendall

I bruised my knuckles once. I smashed my hand against a wooden wardrobe. I like that, when my knuckles burn purple for a brief moment. A reminder of the blood underneath. Red, purple. I like that kind of searing pain where your veins pump, where you wait for the heat to subside and the numbness to kick in.

That time, I was in my university dorm. My phone, resting on the rolling chair by my bedside, rang. Sundays are when Mom calls so it's Mom. My hand still pulsed, coddled against my stomach and I slowly slid my way down the half-open wardrobe door until I was slumped over. I kicked the chair and heard my phone slide, screeching against that shitty, textured plastic you might call a "seat." And then it hit the ground.

"I'm fine, Mom," I said.

"Fine" in this case felt like a mode of greeting. It had become my new "hello." I was crying a few minutes earlier and when I hung up, I-without paying much mind to it-chucked my phone against the metal bed-frame. It should have cracked then and there.



And this happened all the time, I got upset over one little thing and my anger boiled over the kettle and I wanted to punch something. My door. My wall. Preferably something wooden. But I wasn't the most fond of breaking my fists open so I settled for throwing pillows.

Most people would say I'm rather quiet, reasonable, well-composed. I'm inclined to agree, on most occasions. There are ways in which humans suffocate their anger so that their supposed "rationality" can be let out to breathe. That's what I settled on doing; I stole oxygen from my short-lived bursts of anger. It wasn't enough to let them die.

I should have known better than anyone else that just because you don't know the words that describe your feelings doesn't mean those words don't exist. That's what this revelation is about. That's what this story is about. The outline of a word.

But the good news is that answers come eventually. They come in strange places. For me, it came at two in the morning, during a late-night, eyes-half-open chat. One of my friends has ADHD. We often share stories of mental health, normalized in our private little world. My friend outlined to me a time in which tripping over a stained carpet threw them into an hour of sobbing. An hour or so of that.

"I hate my father," they proclaimed. A triumphant story concluded itself as I hummed in reserved agreement.



And then, my friend stopped and told me that emotional dysregulation is often a symptom of ADHD.

Emotional dysregulation. Remember how those words feel to say. If you've never heard of it before then you aren't alone. I hadn't. Emotional dysregulation can be characterized by rapid and uncontrollable moods, often dangerous ones. Violence, anger, melancholy. Many individuals experience these fluid emotions, first in childhood and then well into adulthood.

If I collapsed "many" down, suddenly "many" might just include me. I was dumbfounded. It was the stupidest I had ever felt in a long time. Despite myself, despite my comfort in being both smart and stupid, I wanted to sink. I wanted to sink into the ground and let worms carve a home out of me and my stupidity, flesh and all. There is such a thing as an ADHD industry and men have a monopoly over it. What becomes of the narratives that the monopoly crushes under its heel? It took me this long before I considered that my emotions were weighted. They had enough weight to carve a chunk of letters from marble and sculpt them into their own, realized language.

I broke my toenail once. This was back home, in my childhood bedroom. In another fit, I kicked the door open and watched the blood pool and clump underneath the nail. I followed the swirl of flesh and blood with eager eyes. The nail had split in two.

With courage, finally, I ripped off what was left hanging.

### the perdurable pedestal

### Cristina Arruda

we endure
as a people we endure
simply for our outer casing
melanin rich
beauties
endure prejudice
brutality



if I were but a darker shade of white you would not hate me you would call me "sun kissed" you would call me "exotic"

if I were a darker shade of white you would cast me as an Egyptian in a blockbuster movie

but I am another shade darker darker darker

so when my son went out to buy candy
he was shot in the street
in what they'll call
self defence
for the fearful profile
of a biased cop

and when my son confronted by another officer raised his hands to surrender unarmed he was shot 12 times

black residents seen less as constituents to be protected than as potential offenders and sources of revenue

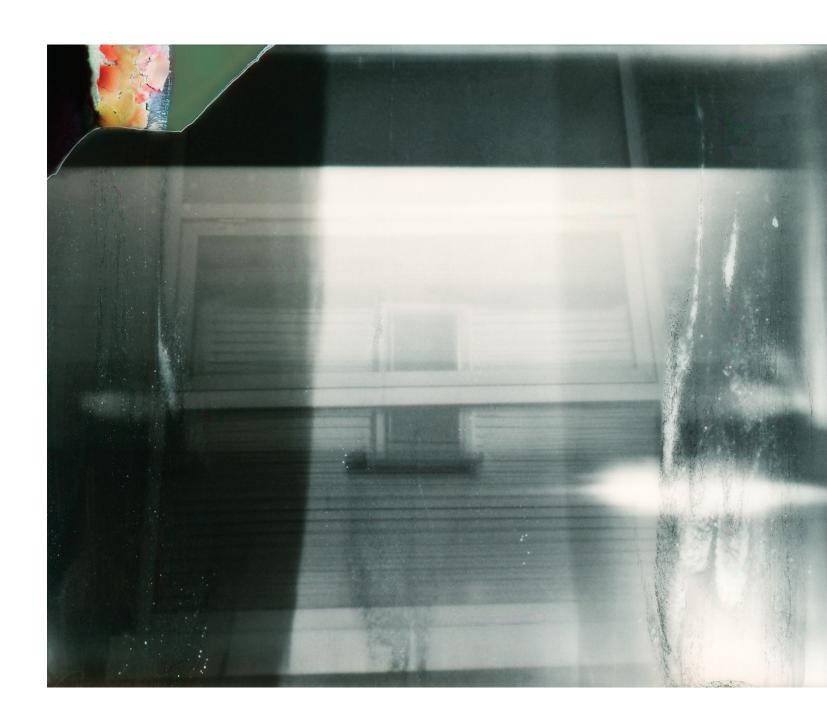
so on the front lines of justice while we fight for human rights tear gas eased with gallons of milk we're reminded that you can riot if you're white and your team wins the super bowl but if you riot when your black brothers and sisters are shamelessly murdered you'll burn

and endure

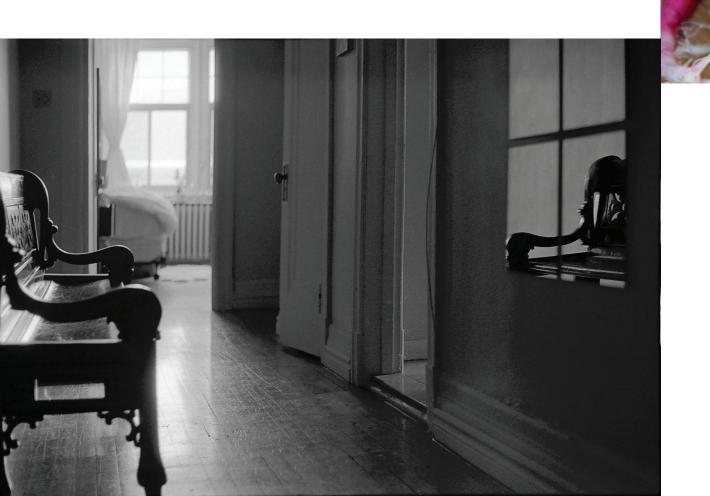




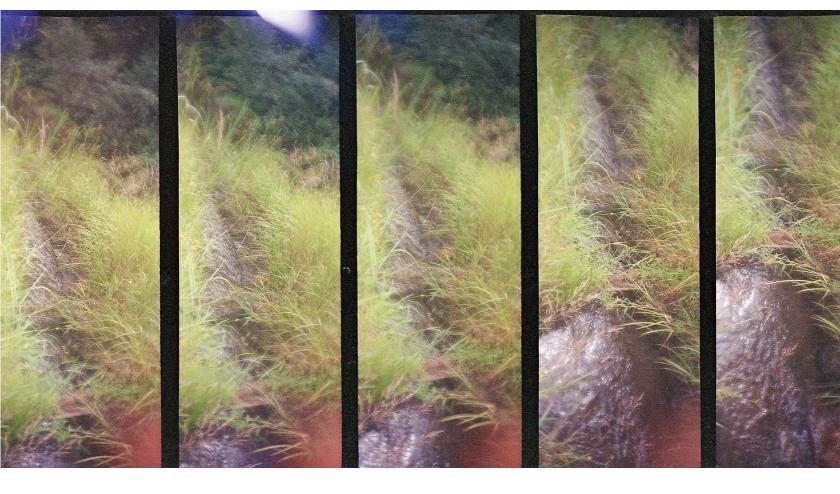
Of my grandmother's legacy, I can only recall snippets of sentences that snap me out of the continuous daydream-like experience of being an immigrant. At night, her voice, her words sometimes resonate so deep that they disrupt the now usual English narration of my oneiric life, and I wake up.



Her voice inside of me is the voice I remember from when she used to babysit me: tender, strong and full of laughter. I used to believe she was making fun of me, the way adults do when a child explains to them things they have known for a while.







Knowing her, that's highly probable, but she was also teaching me some well-needed levity since I used to think jokes were a waste of my and everyone's time.







When she left us, I had not seen her for at least ten years, because she was living in a small village where the Internet was so spotty that video chats were not an option. The poor connection and the passing of time had transformed her voice into the raspy and cracked sound I have always associated in my head with the Delphic oracle.









I don't know why hers is the loudest of all the voices that are my constant companions, louder than my father's concerned voice when I told him I was moving to a major Canadian city or my mother's very calm voice as a counterpoint to his, reminding him and myself of what I can do; louder that my brother and my sister's voices, who like me have now both a Spanish-speaking and an English-speaking voice with new inflections and even a new pitch; louder than the voices of my uncles, aunts, many cousins, nieces and nephews, and the host of actual and virtual memories associated with each and every one of them.







Abuela



All I know is that on what was her last night as I found out later, I heard within me the echo of what she had told me before I had to go through the passengers' gate at the Cuenca airport, el Aeropuerto Mariscal Lamar.

Mi hija, donde estés, siempre estaré contigo, siempre estaremos contigo, en la huella a veces imperceptible que esas memorias compartidas dejaron sobre tu percepción del mundo que te rodea.

A week after, in my house, as I was browsing through the deteriorating photographic images recorded when she came to visit, 15 years ago, the ache of her absence became overwhelming. I stormed out on my bicycle and stopped only to snap pictures away to blunt the edges of my loss and the feeling that memories were gliding past me like sand through my fingers.

A car drove by, windows down, leaving in its wake a few seconds of a Pedro Infante song. All of a sudden, my grandmother was by my side. Three minutes later, another car with its soundtrack of Luis Miguel songs brought in the rest of my family. I was flooded with memories of large family gatherings, of running around with my cousins and covering the sound of music with our stomping and laughter, of adult conversations about politics, football (that's how soccer is known in the rest of the world), as well as scandals, deaths and births in the family.













Everything I saw reminded me of them: how we were a smorgasbord of personalities, sizes and shapes, and often ideologies. Specific topics would temporarily split us into factions that a few minutes later merge into a Roman cohort to defend the family against any perceived external threat,

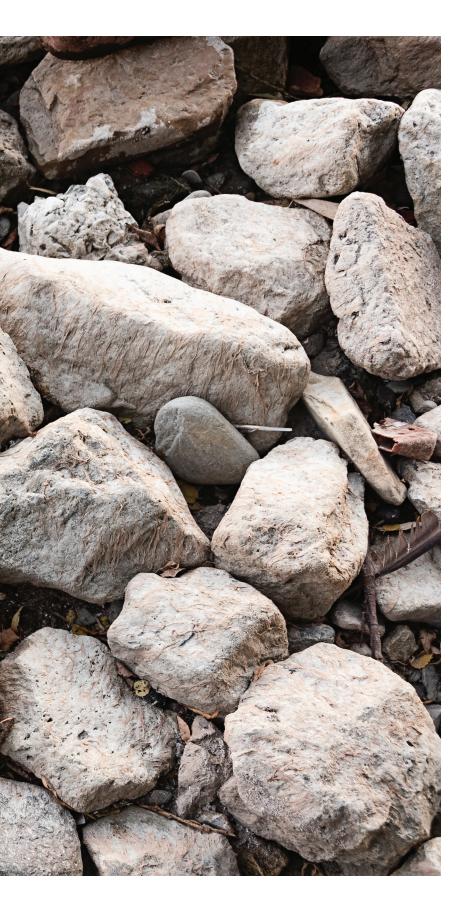


like that time when neighbours tried to criticize my cousin Pepe for choosing to adopt a child as a single father or to defend my aunt Manuela who definitely drank too much and got into her fair share of brawls.

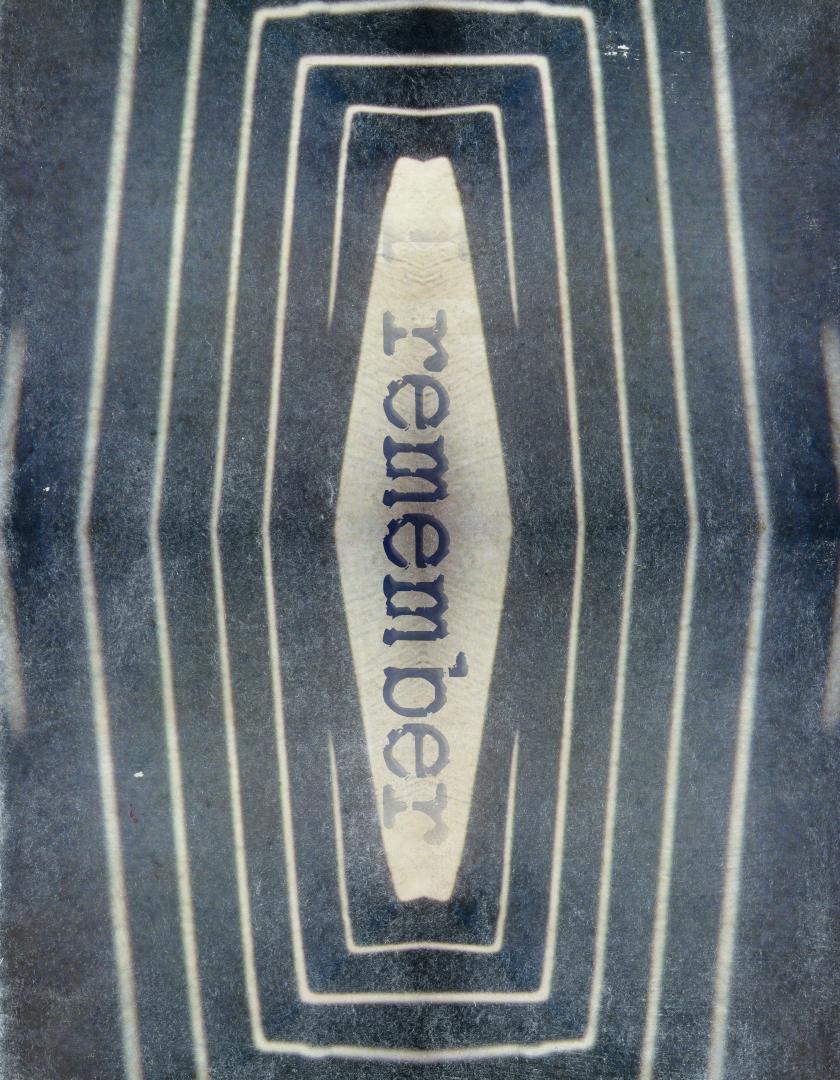








So my grandmother was right. But then she very often was. I guess that is one of the advantages of getting older. I know those images I have collected during my walk, my family album of sorts, cannot anchor my loved ones into this world nor materialize them in my tiny Torontonian apartment. But as long as I can remember them, I can turn those images into an altar, a sacred occupied area of ultra-spatial and ultratemporal connection.



## **INTRUDE**

#### Amna Asif

SCHOOLCHILD: SEVEN YEARS OLD.

It was late afternoon. The clock ticked four fifteen. Nissa lay on the carpeted floor, watching TV. It was some meaningless weekend sitcom. She tilted her head to the side, trying to get a better view of the TV set that was situated on the floor. But did it really matter if she couldn't see it well? It was all in their alien gibberish language anyway.

She looked over to where her infant brother sat in the purple laundry basket that was tucked into the corner near the kitchen, babbling away to his toy giraffe. They had just bought the basket yesterday from the superstore, so it was all shiny and waxy plastic. The bright purple hurt her eyes if she looked too much at it. Her brother caught her eye and paused in his monologue to the giraffe to present her with a gummy smile. Nissa contorted her face into what she hoped looked like a smile back at him, then she turned back to the TV and put her cheek down into the scratchy

carpet.

The characters on the TV droned on in a low volume, their faces animated with shocked expressions. Nissa swam across the short length of the living room towards the giant TV set and reached out to press the button to change the channel. It was the first time she had ever seen such an ancient television without a remote. However, neither one of her parents were working so the grandfather electrical appliance was all that they could afford. And so, anytime she had a change of heart about what to mindlessly stare at, she would have to make the trek across the sea of carpet like an Olympic athlete in training. Back and forth, back and forth.

She wished she could increase the volume, but that would make the small bedroom door burst open and she would be fixed with a glare for waking her parents up. Better not to risk it. Her brother's babbling got increasingly louder as his lecture to the giraffe reached its peak. His small hands flew in circles, flitting across the air like butterflies high on nectar, eyes wide with excitement. The cartoons on the screen mouthed words incoherently. Nissa wished she could understand what they were saying. Even her infant brother could probably understand what they were saying. Maybe they were speaking the same language and she just didn't know because she was even more of an intruder in this strange country.

The robot on the TV screen flitted in and out of existence. Babble, babble in the background. The orange rays coming in at an angle from the window cut the room into pieces. Nissa wished the babbling would stop. The clock ticked five o'clock. She lay collapsed on the living room floor like a dead starfish.

## My Friend's House

#### Alexander MacIsaac

If someone were to ask me if I had ever been homeless, I wouldn't exactly know how to answer them. Yes, my Mother and I had gone without a home before, but we had never lived on the streets. The time we spent homeless was in a short collection of women's shelters.

In our final attempt to flee from my father, we ended up in a new town, in a shelter called My Friend's House. I remember ten-year-old me thinking that name was exceedingly clever, because if anyone ever asked me where I was living, I could look them in the eye and say, "At my friend's house," and they would be none the wiser about my true situation.

My Friend's House was styled in a similar way to what the name suggests. It was a large house in the middle of a residential street, with a kitchen, a living room, a backyard, everything a house should have. The biggest difference was the sheer amount of people that lived there, the majority of which were young mothers.

Over my first few days there, I grew to know some of these women. One lady was about my mother's age, and she said her son was the same age as myself. I remember wondering why he wasn't there with her.

Another woman was older than my mother and wheelchair bound. Whenever she returned to the house at the end of the day, she would bring me and some of the other children candies and tell us not to mention it to our mothers.

Another resident there, Tammy, was only a few years my mother's senior, though all her children were grown now. Despite our short stay, she and my mother became fast friends.

Looking back, my first few days there were exciting. There was a large playroom with a computer that the kids could use for a few hours each day. I had never had my own computer, and so most days I found myself crowding around its bulky monitor, each of us taking turns playing the simple games installed on it.

All the bedrooms were on the second floor of the house, in one long row down a cramped hallway. The bedrooms were small, and each had just enough room for a bunk bed and a dresser. When we first moved in, I insisted on taking the top bunk, and when I lay there, I could reach my hand upward and place my palm against the popcorn ceiling. I liked to imagine we were all soldiers, our rooms all in a line, each retreating to their own bunk at the end of the day.

In the backyard, there was a collection of old lawn chairs, and many of the women would sit there together during the daytime. The air around them would fill with the harsh smoke of their cigarettes and the brassy notes of their laughter. There was also a small jungle gym on a paved lot, and while my Mother smoked, I would play there with the other children until the soles of my feet were black.

One thing I learned quickly about My Friend's House was that there were rules for everything. There were rules on when to wake up, when to have breakfast, when to go to sleep. One staff member told me that I could stay up an extra hour and go to my room at 10 instead of 9 if my mother supervised me in the playroom, but she never did this no matter how much I begged. I eventually relented, and spent my nights reading on my top bunk until one of the other mothers came up and told me it was time for bed. They each took turns doing this, walking down the cramped hallway and making sure each other's children were asleep.

One of the rules I did not understand at first had to do with men. Another member of staff told me that if I was older, I wouldn't be allowed at My Friend's House. When I asked why, she said it was a male-free space, and it was meant to protect everyone that stayed there. I pondered that for a while, unsure what to think. Then, I thought of my own father, and found I had an inkling of understanding about that rule.

The harshest rule I learned at My Friend's House came about after we had already been there for several weeks. I came downstairs for breakfast one morning alone, as my Mother had not been in the bunk underneath me when I woke up.

"Do you know where my Mom is?" I asked Tammy.

"She's around, don't worry," she said, and took me to the kitchen to help me get some breakfast.

It was when I was eating that my Mother appeared. She stomped into the kitchen with a swiftness that I knew meant she was angry. Everyone stopped what they were doing as she entered, almost as if paralyzed. She had the sort of presence that demanded your attention.

"They're kicking us out!" she announced to the gathered group, her voice shaking. As I looked at her, I noticed that her eyes were red, and her cheeks glistened. It had been weeks since I had seen my Mother cry.

Tammy came forward and quickly guided my Mom out of the kitchen, and they both retreated upstairs. I wanted to know what had happened, but I knew that I wasn't meant to see my Mother this way. Besides, I had learned early in my life of my Mom's penchant for hyperbole, so I tried not to panic.

I found out later from context clues and snatches of overheard conversation that My Friend's House had a rule that they didn't like to mention. They gave you six weeks. Six weeks to find a place to live, or you had to leave. And we'd already been there five. I wanted to ask my Mother if we'd be able to find a home in time, but I also knew that I wasn't supposed to know, so I held back and tried not to think about it.

There was a tension to our days after that, though. My Mother seemed to spend more time in the front office than anywhere else, and I would wonder sometimes what they were talking about there.

Days passed, and once again I woke one morning to find my Mother missing. I dressed, digging my clothes out of the dresser I shared with her, and headed downstairs.

I found my Mother in the TV room with Tammy, and she turned to me with a bright smile when she saw me approach.

She practically ran to me and took my hands in hers.

"I have the best news," she said.

She took me to see what would soon be our new home later that day. It was a townhouse, one right in the middle of a row of its identical siblings. We walked to the door and peeked inside through the windows together.

"That's probably your room," my Mother said, pointing up at a window on the second floor.

My room. I hadn't had one of my own in a while.

We moved in within two weeks. It seemed the six-week rule went out the window if you already had a place lined up. I remember arriving there, all our possessions in garbage bags and boxes swiped from grocery stores. There was a group of people helping us move that I didn't know, but I learned they were friends of my Mother's boyfriend at the time.

I darted around the house, getting a lay of the land. I liked it. It was more space than had ever been ours before. It was better than the dusty apartments, the bedrooms at family members' houses, the short stints at my father's home—and it was all our own. I saw my room for the first time, and it had to be three times the size of the one at My Friend's House, and I was excited to fill it with my books and toys and other little possessions. I looked out my bedroom window, and saw kids playing outside, and I wanted to go meet them.

One of the men helping us move came into my room with a box, and I turned to face him.

"This place is huge!" I said to him, feeling my excitement rushing through my whole body.

He made a sound similar to a grunt and set down the box.

"Just be careful around this place, kid. I've heard things about the people that live here."

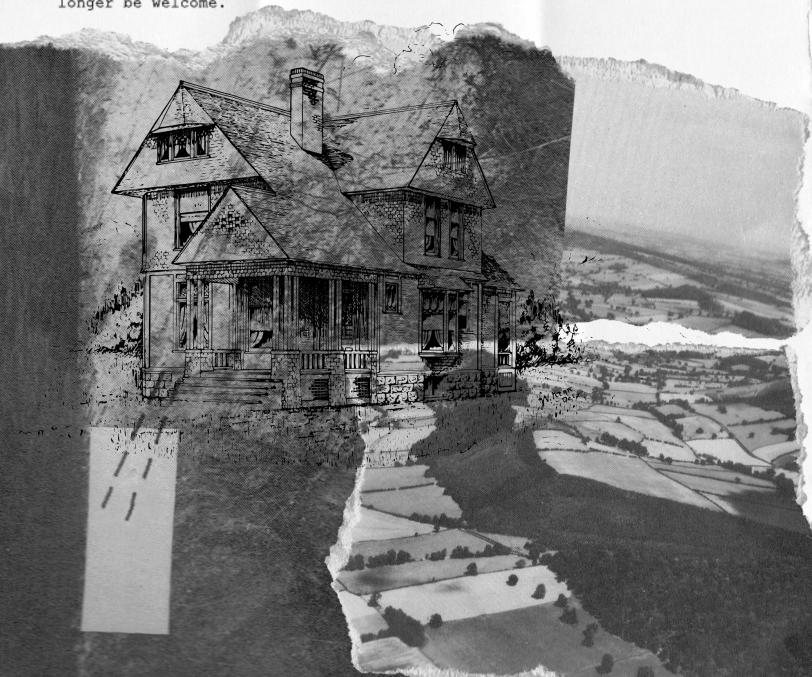
I wasn't sure what he meant by that, and I tried to pay it no mind. I looked out my window again, seeing all the other identical rows of townhouses.

I discovered later that our new home did in fact have a reputation.

Just like My Friend's House, it was filled with families, only now there were no restrictions on men. But there was also the odd dangerous type that I knew to steer clear of. It seemed that people saw the scattering of what they decided were undesirables, and labelled everyone that lived here as such, when in truth we were all just poor.

I didn't care, or at least tried not to. It was my home. It still is now.

Years later, after I had grown and left my ten-year-old self somewhere in the past, I went to visit a friend's house. I walked there, and as I made my way up that street, I knew that it seemed familiar. Sure enough, as I kept walking, I saw the shelter that had been my home for those few weeks just across the street. It looked the same, as if no time had passed at all. I wondered idly who was in that bunk that I had loved, and if the jungle gym was still there, and if I would still recognize the staff. But I was an adult by then, a boy grown into a man, and knew that I would no longer be welcome.



## Red Everywhere

Page

Eduard Tatomir

It was just a smoke break. Two minutes, tops. I didn't even finish the cigarette, not that it would've mattered.

When we'd first moved in, the flora was all I could see. It grew into our home through the windows and devastated entire walls. Vines and branches and fallen leaves made our kitchen part of its environment.

"Mommy, look! Look at all the green!"

She put our box of clothes down and squinted. "Where? I don't see it!"

I tugged at her sleeve, giving her a tour of the house. "It's here! It's everywhere!"

We took a picture together, not the best quality but definitely the best memory.

Over the years, she had changed. Her skin became colourless and her heart thumped slower. 2008 was hard for everyone, but it ruined my mom. Her job was gone and the collectors on the telephone grew angrier with each call.

"My mother isn't home," I said once to get them to stop. "She's never coming home." I almost believed it myself, even though she was on the couch right next to me. Maybe I wasn't completely lying.

It took her months to finally get the photo of us printed, but she was too weak to get a frame for it, let alone a nail to hang it on.

She started the pills, and life was a bit brighter again. The days were longer and the greenery came back inside, the habitat hospitable for it. Of course, I was too old to jump up and down for it, but it still made me smile every morning when I would grab my coffee.

Mom did too, sometimes.

I even took our photo and bought it a little frame, the kind that sits up on its own. No nail required. We looked so happy, because we were, and I was sure we'd get there again someday.

Then, I found her in the bathroom, and at the hospital she told us she'd stopped the medication.

"Why?" I asked.

And she didn't have an answer.

I had to count the pills every morning from then on and hand her the glass of water. It didn't help anymore. But it didn't hurt, either.

I'd wake up from nightmares thinking she'd done it again and succeeded. That there would be blood everywhere. I would hold her hand to fall back asleep, just to make sure she wasn't going anywhere.

We were about to lose our home. My paycheques were so small when pitted against everything we owed. It would crumble before even making a dent.

"I can't work, baby," she'd told me. "I just can't."

I regret everything I said that night, every word, however true it may have been. I'm sure she does, too.

Our photo ended up on the opposite side of the room,

Our photo ended up on the opposite side of the room, the frame shattered.

I just needed to get out of the house. A break. A smoke break. Two minutes.

That's all it took.

The room wasn't green anymore. It had all died in the cold of winter. It was red. A bright red. And it was everywhere.

This was nothing like my nightmares.

It was so much worse.



dead end, dead air just the smell of cigarette smoke the sourness of the unwashed carpet have i been here for an hour? twenty minutes? twenty years? blue light blends into garish yellow the world bores into the space between my ribs and I can hear them cracking, splittingall i can think about is the peeling paint on the living room walls the way that the dull, flickering light swarms across the ceiling above me a thousand moths fluttering, bodied pressed together, choked air thick with dust fogging my thoughts memories could there ever have been a time before this? no ceiling no rotten carpet no sweat-stained dressjust wide wide skies scudded with wild winds just the roar of fireworks bursting in the night just rain on the windshield, and us screaming along to the battered radio andandthe lampshades are crooked i can hear the subterranean hum of the radiator in my teeth the light swarms wake up wake up



wake-





## Two Barking Dogs





I was a block away from my home when I rolled my ankle because my right foot had lunged itself in one of the wide cracks that accompanied the sidewalk I was walking on. How my foot managed to that was beyond my reasoning, it was a diagonal crack and I remember asking myself, how come my foot be this incompetent? diagonally, rather than straight. And it was a bad roll too, with agony I cried when my muscles stretched and burned, and when the bones bent in a concerning way, only to snap itself back as it were. And I also remember asking myself why the sidewalks hadn't been fixed yet. People around the neighbourhood keep complaining in whatever municipal government building, and unfortunate victims, such as I, have expressed their anger and shared their stories of ankles being broken, though I personally never complained myself; I have heard that one of my neighbours had. People said they would get it fixed, but alas, it had been three months since news spread, and there hasn't even been caution tapes or glowing-orange pylons placed, or markers sprayed. And the neighbourhood keeps on complaining and making people sign petitions almost every week, which, I wouldn't mind signing, if it meant that the sidewalks would get fixed, but it hasn't, and I had rolled an ankle.

I was only a few feet away from my home when two dogs from two different houses had met in the center of the road, one of them had hopped over a fence and the other exited his dog-door. On the road, they were circling around each other and barking at each other's faces. They had stopped three cars trying to pass, they were honking, but the dogs were determined to bark at each other, so they did not move and continued barking. It was only when the owners came out and pulled the dogs by their collars did they stop, and there I experienced a strange exchange.

"Control your dog, Sally," one of the owners said.

"Why won't you control yours, Margaret!" the other owner said.

"It wasn't my dog that started barking," Margaret said.

"Oh, yes it was!" Sally replied.

"And how did you know that? Were you watching?"

"Of course, I was, what kind of dog owner would I be if I hadn't."

"Your dog is twice the size of mine."

"Well, he started it anyway."

"It's a girl."

"I didn't ask!"

They were separating like the red sea and threw the dogs inside their houses. But before they closed their doors, Sally peeked her head out and yelled across the street.

"You still coming Saturday night?" Sally asked.

To which Margaret replied, "Yes! Do you want me to bring lasagna or spaghetti?"

"Chef's choice!" Sally answered with a wide smile.

When I entered my house, I could tell that I was the first to come back from work since three pairs of sandals were still on the floor. I flicked on the lights and slipped on my red pair. I was thirsty, and I was craving a refrigerated pineapple juice box I had saved the day before. I had noticed it from afar when it bled through the archway, and I entered the kitchen only to be flooded by a cold red light. It was hard to see, and I bumped my waist into the corner of the countertop. But to be fair, I've always hit that spot even without the dim-red light. I walked past the sink to see that it hadn't been washed. Mark was supposed to wash it this morning and it had irked me that he didn't. But I drank the pineapple juice under the red light only to feel fine. In the silence, as I sipped my juice, I noticed I was accompanied by an incremental ticking from the clock on the wall, the one that has been broken and never fixed. I had told them, many times now, not to put batteries in it, but they've always persisted. And so, the clock on the wall continuously ticking, never moving any of its arms. It frustrated me.

I had intended to wait for Mark to come home and talk about the dishes, but the clock had already tested my patience, leaving it famished, and so I sent him a message about it. When the message read sent, I could hear the doorknob being twiddled with and the door creaking open. I knew it was Mark because of his yawn, which is more of a growl really.

I called him in the kitchen and he too noticed the red light as he walked in with raised eyebrows. He must have seen me throw out the juice box because he asked if there was any pineapple juice left, I told him no. He then proceeded to ask if I changed the bulb and I told him I didn't.

"I just changed it yesterday," I noted.

"Oh yeah, it was the yellow one. That was a pretty shitty light," he said.

"I only bought it because you forgot," I commented, but I didn't want to push the topic further. I wanted to push something else. "Besides, it's better than red... Speaking of forgetting, you also forgot to do the dishes."

He said he was sorry and twirled his curly hair. "C'mon, Mark. There's a system here. You wash the dishes in the morning because you're the last to leave, I wash dinner, Enrico throws the garbage and cleans the table. And look at these plates, they're disgusting, a dog wouldn't even lick it. We all gotta do our part, you agreed to that when you moved in. I shouldn't even be reminding you, not this many times. And it's not just the dishes, you know. On the weekend you sleep in half the day, while Enrico and I clean the entire house. You didn't use to be like this. What wrong, Mark, are you depressed? Are you not feeling good? Because I told you not to eat the bread, I mean it was green, how could you not see? Did Diana dump you... again?"

He couldn't help but grin and had apologies again, shifting his way to the sink to wash the crusted plates. He also commented on the red light.

"I bet it was Enrico, you know, the light... You know his red room downstairs, it's broken."

"You mean the darkroom? In what way? I just saw it yesterday, it looked normal to me."

"In the way that I broke it... Last night, I went to go check on my family portrait he's developing, you know from my mom's birthday, and I couldn't see anything because the light was red and dim, just like this one. Anyways, I was done looking at it so I pulled the string to close the light and I slipped on, what must have been a roll of film, or something else that's a cylinder, and I was still grabbing on the string and pulled the light down with me and I also managed to flip his workbench."

"Jesus."

"I know."

"Is that why he-"

Before I could finish my sentence, the door had once more creaked open and Enrico entered with a string of "yo" exiting his mouth. I called him in the kitchen, and he entered with lowered eyebrows, darting his eyes around the red kitchen.

"So, what's up?" he said.

Before I could speak, Mark thought to speak first, "We're wondering why you changed the light?"

"This light?" Enrico asked.

"This light," Mark returned.

"Why would you think it's me?"

"Well," I rejoined. "We thought you were using the kitchen as a new darkroom because Mark broke the one in the basement."

He jolted, as though he'd been shot, and raised his eyebrows as far as he could. "You what?" Enrico screamed in horror.

Mark had nudged me and, in a moralizing tone, told me that he didn't tell him.

"I didn't know," I defended myself. "You didn't tell me!"

He was finished with the dishes and had wiped his hands from the cloth roughly, all the while Enrico disowned him.

"I mean, how could you be such a drongo? How do you destroy a room? The sheer stupidity it takes to do that. Didn't you go to university? I mean you should have majored in not-screwing-up, you would have been much more helpful then than just designing toilets, you bloody plumber."

"I'm not a plumber and it wasn't my fault! I tripped on a roll of film. If you would have cleaned the room, this wouldn't have happened."

"Oh, you want to talk about cleaning when you sleep inside a thrift shop that nobody goes to. You know that my 6-year-old relative has a tidier room than yours?"

"Then you should live with him."

"Maybe I should give you his parent's number and you go and live with him."

I had tried to ease down my two roommates by telling them to calm down, I didn't really know how to ease them properly, so I pulled the discussion back to the red light and told them to bicker after this enigma was solved.

The puzzle proved itself to be a short conversation, all three of us denied having changed the lightbulb.

"Before I had gone downstairs last night, I stopped by the kitchen for a quick drink. I turned on the light and I remember it still being yellow," Mark added.

"How about this morning?" I asked him. "Did you turn the lights on after breakfast when Enrico and I were gone?"

"No."

"Liar," Enrico attacked Mark.

Mark cursed at Enrico.

"This isn't the first time he's lied," Enrico continued. "I would like to recall last year, on my birthday, when he said he'd gotten me a gift and it was just his old trousers. Or when he gave you a card with a piece of chewed gum glueing the inside of it, so that it wouldn't open completely. There wasn't even money, just a chewed gum."

"That was a prank," Mark defended himself.

"Joke, prank. What's the difference? You've lied either way. And what says that this isn't a prank? I get the punchline, it's because you've destroyed my darkroom, right? Are there hidden cameras anywhere? C'mon Mark, jig's up. Give us the normal light back."

"Whatever," Mark said. "Why do you even need a red room, you barely take any photos anyways, all just portraits and family photos because people ask you to. When was the last time you've taken a picture for yourself? Looked at a damn tree and told yourself, 'that's a nice-looking tree,' and took a photo of it. Remember when you used to take pictures of trees? Big tall-fucking-trees, woo wee woo waa, looks like we got a self-proclaimed photographer here, as our roommate, no less!" Mark turned his heads towards me and shifted his eyes and voice, to look and sound more endearing. "Hey there mister, would you like to buy some photographs of some trees. They're a real sport, a real treat. Why trees you asked? Well, it's because I'm blind, and all I could see are trees..." I told him to stop but he continued pushing his act. "Look right here, the famous Casa Loma... tree. Forget about the castle, why look at a castle when you can look at a tree."

Enrico pushed Mark with great force, pushing him back to the other end of the kitchen. Though, it was a relatively tiny kitchen. I held Enrico back with my arms and although Mark did not try to fight back, he continued delivering deadly blows.

"You're a fraud!" Mark proclaimed, "A phony; twiddling away towards failure because you don't know what it's like to grind for success."

"Take that back," Enrico grunted.

"What do you mean take that back? I can't just 'take words back.' They've been said, and there's nothing anyone can do about it but forget it. To take it back I'd have to travel back in time. Do I look like I have a time machine on me?"

"That's right," Enrico nodded. "You're either don't have enough money to buy one or too stupid to build one, Mr. Bloody toilet engineer... Speaking of which I just took a shit and the toilet got clogged... did you really just fail at your one job? If you're too incompetent to make toilets, then what good are you in this world?"

"Take that back," Mark grunted in return.

"Whatever happened to, 'I need a time machine?'"

"Wha'ever happen' to I need  $\alpha h$  time machine?" Mark said in a mocking voice.

Enrico had asked me for a bottle of water, but this only gave Mark more fuel.

"What's wrong?" He began. "Need a bo'ohw'o'wo'er... Is the manz thirsty?" Mark turned to me again, "He's a rather schtewpid bloke innit?"

"Stop it," Enrico demanded.

"What's wrong? Aren't you bri'ish?"

"You know I'm Australian."

"What's the day today?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Just what's the day today?" Mark continued to push.

"It's Tuesday," Enrico answered. Except his accent broke through and Tuesday sounded like Chewsday.

Mark turned his head towards mine and with a grin and a nod he said, "What's the difference?"

Enrico threw the half-empty bottle at Mark and he giggled in return.

They began circling around me, like two predators ready to eat each other, and I was the antelope in between their way. And it was clear that I would get eaten before they started eating each other.

Some time has passed, and they've been delivering verbal blows to each other, but there was a time of silence where the two beasts just looked at each other. The broken clock's ticking had sounded louder and faster, and I was counting down the seconds when the silence would break and when the bloodshed would begin.

With fixed-piercing eyes, they stared as though they were ready to unholster their gun and fire at each other. Mark's eyes twitched, Enrico's did as well. And Mark broke the silence.

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"What?" He said with a smug tone.

"What?" Enrico replied with great aggression.

"What?" Mark answered quickly.

"What?" Enrico said holding the first syllable.

"What?" Mark said with a high voice.

"What?" Enrico said with a higher voice.

"What?" Mark said with an ever-higher voice.

"What?" Enrico shouted.

"What?"

"What?"

"What?"
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"What?"
"What?"

"Hark!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. I didn't know why I had chosen the word "hark," but it worked. So, as I had their attention, I drew one last breath and spoke. "You're killing me! What the hell is wrong with you people. This is the problem here! Right here! The problem with you and you. The problem with every fight that's ever accumulated over the past years. Why do you insist on driving yourselves in front of a brick wall? Don't you see you're both in the same car. But there's no driver! No man on the wheel! Because neither of you can decide. And I'm stuck, strapped behind the trunk. And you'd rather see us crash in front of the brick wall. Then what? What? What? What? Don't get me started on the whats. What the hell was even that. Get a ruler and measure something else. At least it will keep your mind off things. Shit! And why is the room red! And why is that clock ticking when it's already been stopped. Go, leave! To your rooms and not the house. Because damn me if I'm finding other roommates and damn you if you're finding other hosts."

I had remembered every line I said, and I often replayed it in my head. Looking back, I think I may have gone mad. Mad of the red room.

I woke up in the middle of the night. I had not gone to sleep. I walked around like a ghost in the house. I was counting backwards, and I started from a hundred, while I was looking at our pale hallway, our brown stairs, white-stained doors, and the stained and dusted floors. So, I took the Swiffer and wiped the shelves and took the broom and cleaned the floors. After I had finished, I went to the

kitchen and flicked the lights open, they were still red. I was wobbling around; the light had shut my eyes even further. But as I pinched myself awake, I grabbed the spare yellow-light bulb and changed the red-light. It was now yellow, and its brightness had blinded my eyes. Burned me like a vampire seeing the sun.

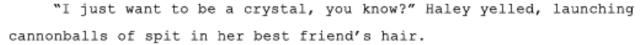
As I crushed the box, I noticed there was something inside, my fingers pulled out a remote, it had buttons with different individual colours. I read the text behind the box and it read that it could change colours. And my mind told itself: that's why it was more expensive than the rest. When I bought it, I figured that because it was more expensive, it was the one that emitted the pure white light, but no, I guess the extra two bucks just granted it the ability to change colours.

Before I had left the kitchen, I had knocked the clock down off the wall and threw it in the bin. I laid on the couch, my head under the pillow and thought to myself: maybe a raccoon was rummaging in the garbage and found the remote for that light, and while it was playing with it, it clicked the red button, turning the light red. It was a thought, and although it sounded stupid, I convinced myself that it was just as plausible as any other thoughts had been. And with this last thought, I slept.



# Crystal Ribs

### Kieona George



"I totally see that, like you are this bright pink gemstone just shining...and it's like they see you, we see you," her best friend Agnes yelled back two inches beside her.

"No, it's not the shininess, it's like right now I'm this jellybean but these next four years, I want to come out the other side, tough and able to handle anything," Haley said, before taking another sip of punch that tasted like all the options on a pop machine mixed together. "I want to be hardened."

"I'm sorry, you want to be what?" asked a guy beside them who was reaching for the bowl of Doritos. His student mixer name tag stated that his name was Chris.

"Go ahead and tell him Hales, how you want to be hardened. I need another drink!" Agnes jumped to the beat of the playing pop song as she stranded Haley for the hundredth time during their decade-long friendship. Haley smiled and adjusted her jacket under crossed arms. "I don't mean it like that. Although I'm not sure you would know what I meant anyway."

"Wow, ten seconds. That's a record for how fast I've ever been insulted," said Chris.

"Surely, you'll find faster tonight," said Haley.

"What a cutting remark, drama major?" Chris asked.



"English. Business major?"

"No, engineering."

Haley nodded, "Ah, so you hate yourself?"

"Honestly, we all do. I just hope to be well-paid for it in 10 years."

"I think you'll find that will be the longest record for you to be insulted," Haley laughed.

"You laugh at your own sort-of jokes?" Chris asked.

"Yes, your mom said it's the best way to cope," Haley replied as someone grabbed her arm.

"You know his mom?" Agnes asked. She was without a drink and wearing heart sunglasses and a greek symbol sticker on her cheek.

"Not yet, but she's getting close!" Chris said, matching his volume to Agnes.

Haley smiled.

"What's on your face there?" Chris asked Agnes.

"It's a sticker for this sorority, I think we should join!" she cheered and shook Haley, spilling drops of all the pop in the world on their shoes.

"I don't know how I would feel in their housing," Chris said.

Haley rolled her eyes. "If there's a no animals allowed rule, you're probably-"

Agnes suddenly froze and pulled down her sunglasses. "Hales, it's our Lorde and saviour! Come dance with me!" Agnes pulled Haley's arm and speared into the centre of the whirlpool of bodies swaying under red and purple lights.

They danced to the music sung by a girl who felt the heartbreak of growing up. Eighteen months before Haley and Agnes stop being friends in a breakup that will be worse than the one Haley and Chris go through in three years. They laughed and joined the current of dancing bodies two years before Haley is published in her favourite magazine. Three years and seven months before she has an anxiety attack. Before she melts down from struggle and is cooled by time, she danced to a song called Ribs.

## Misty Yellow Room

#### Cassandra Lubiana

I remember what it was like laying on the floor my back pressed hard into the earth in that misty yellow room.

I remember what it was like; closing my eyes, my thoughts screaming inside.
The fluorescent lights burning into my closed eyelids; lightning but no thunder.

Tell me about your prison;
Is it your mind?
Your heart?
The room you haven't left in god knows how long now?

And yes, I remember what it was like, the tv blaring just to muffle my thoughts.

My hands gripping the dirty shag carpeting beneath me, as if I was trying to hold on.

And what was I holding on to?

Versions of past selves I thought I knew?

The version of me you wanted me to be?

My hands went limp;
I let go
and floated up to the ceiling,
my white dress hanging off my skinny frame like curtains

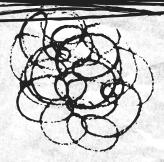
The tv went static
and my mind went quiet.

Peace;
for the first time in months.

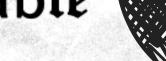
I set my feet firmly on the ground and cracked a window to let some air and some light in.

Bright yellow sunlight in my misty yellow room; a change in perspective.

Is this what freedom tastes like?



## Incomparable



Tooba Syeda

There's a million people Going in different directions

And you stand in the corner And watch

You know exactly who you are

You know exactly what you're doing

At least you did a second ago

But now it's all a haze Because there's a million people

Going this way and that You can't help but wonder What level are you at Are you just as good as the next

Are you quick enough, are you smart enough
Are you worse, better or best

You want the answer?

I'll tell you right now

Here comes the solid truth

You are incomparable

That's the solid truth

A beautiful assortment of sour and sweet
You've felt a life only you have seen
And it is incomparable
With every fall
You learn the lessons meant for you
And it is incomparable
In your mind is a world of magic

You are a dense package
A mixture of this and a
little of that
A design only you could
have crafted into
So help me place you
High up in the sky where
you belong
Right next to everyone else
Where you will shine like a
star

And it is incomparable

Not to outshine another
But to be who you are
And all that you are
Is a gift that's
incomparable

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