

JULY-OCTOBER 2025 - ISSUE 21

Dreamers

Creative Writing

2025 Haiku Contest Winners

Fiction | Nonfiction
Book Reviews | Poetry
Interviews | Articles

\$9.95 CAD

Available until November 2025



PULP *Literature*

Six awards for genre-busting
fiction and poetry

The Bumblebee Flash Fiction Contest

Deadline: 15 February
Prize: \$300

The Magpie Award for Poetry

Deadline: 15 April
First Prize: \$500

The Hummingbird Flash Fiction Prize

Deadline: 15 June
Prize: \$300

The First Page Cage

Deadline: 30 September
Prize: \$300

The Raven Short Story Contest

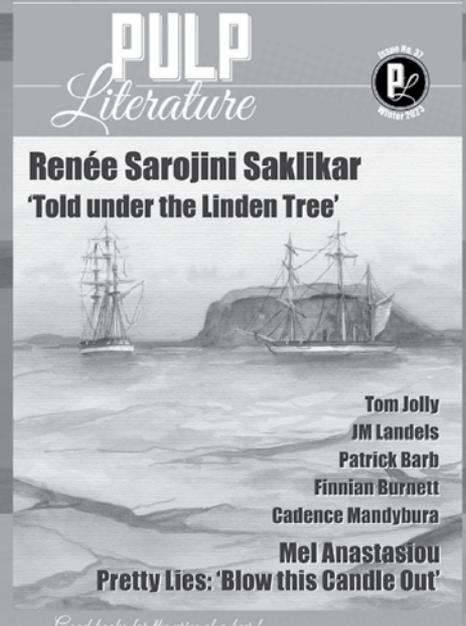
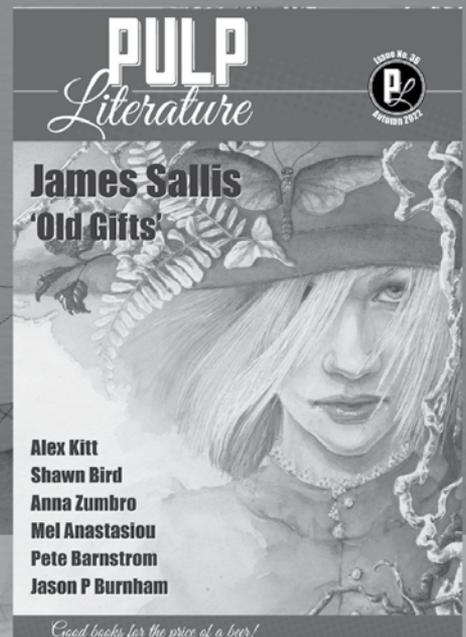
Deadline: 15 October
Prize: \$300

The Kingfisher Poetry Prize

Deadline: 15 November
Prize: \$300



pulpliterature.com/contests





5



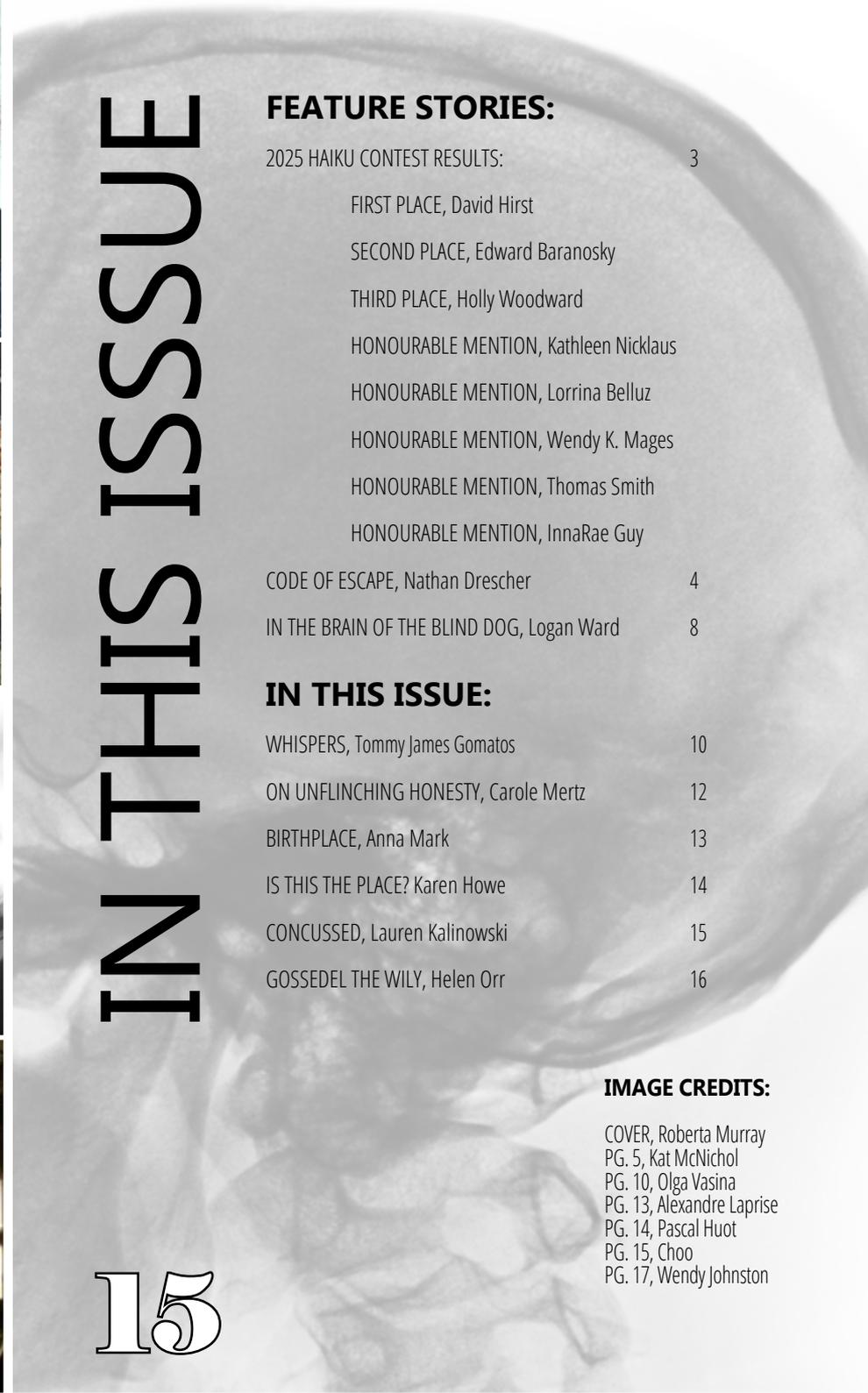
17



14



13



IN THIS ISSUE

15

FEATURE STORIES:

- 2025 HAIKU CONTEST RESULTS: 3
- FIRST PLACE, David Hirst
 - SECOND PLACE, Edward Baranosky
 - THIRD PLACE, Holly Woodward
 - HONOURABLE MENTION, Kathleen Nicklaus
 - HONOURABLE MENTION, Lorrina Belluz
 - HONOURABLE MENTION, Wendy K. Mages
 - HONOURABLE MENTION, Thomas Smith
 - HONOURABLE MENTION, InnaRae Guy

- CODE OF ESCAPE, Nathan Drescher 4
- IN THE BRAIN OF THE BLIND DOG, Logan Ward 8

IN THIS ISSUE:

- WHISPERS, Tommy James Gomasos 10
- ON UNFLINCHING HONESTY, Carole Mertz 12
- BIRTHPLACE, Anna Mark 13
- IS THIS THE PLACE? Karen Howe 14
- CONCUSSED, Lauren Kalinowski 15
- GOSSEDEL THE WILY, Helen Orr 16

IMAGE CREDITS:

- COVER, Roberta Murray
- PG. 5, Kat McNichol
- PG. 10, Olga Vasina
- PG. 13, Alexandre Laprise
- PG. 14, Pascal Huot
- PG. 15, Choo
- PG. 17, Wendy Johnston

“Even in the long shadows,
Remember light.”
-Tommy James Gomasos

10

EDITOR'S LETTER

This issue comes at a time of change for me, one that has asked for more focus and more honesty than I anticipated. The past year has rearranged a lot—work, home, direction—and I've been learning what it means to keep going while rebuilding at the same time. My sincere apologies for the lateness of this issue—the reasons are long and detailed and ultimately irrelevant, except to say that life doesn't always move in a straight line.

Maybe that's why I feel so connected to the work in these pages. There's a thread running through this issue that leans toward the uncanny: pieces that slip between the real and the imagined, that hold a kind of otherworldliness without abandoning truth. An AI vehicle turns dangerous. A child is crowned the ruler of a hidden kingdom. There are monsters of the mind, a hayloft cauldron, and whispers of light and shadow that consider what it means to age, to accept, to keep moving.

And then the haiku—small, distilled, grounded. They steady the issue, offering clarity in the midst of everything else that moves and shifts. My sincere thanks to our haiku judges, Dr. Reinekke Lengelle (Athabasca University) and Dr. Bob Fecho, for their continued insight and care in selecting this year's winners.

Thanks for reading, and for sticking with Dreamers. I'm grateful you're here.

Kat McNichol
Editor-In-Chief

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Kat McNichol

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR
Carole Mertz

REVIEWERS
Colleen McNichol
Phil McNichol
Cedar Newell

HOW TO REACH US
info@dreamerswriting.com
www.dreamerswriting.com
585 Bruce St. Hepworth, ON, CA



Congratulations to the 2025 winning poets!

HAIKU CONTEST

2025

A very sincere thank you to our esteemed judges, Reinekke Lengelle and Bob Fecho!

WINNERS

1st

by David Hirst

Prairie dropseed grass
Having let her shock go gray
Shimmers in the freeze

2nd

by Edward Baranosky

foghorn sol-etudes
a single seagull appears
out of summer haze

3rd

by Holly Woodward

Tossed old love letters,
but the one that said I sucked
at love—that I kept

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

by Kathleen Nicklaus

Rows of playful waves
Tossing up their frothy skirts
Salty can-can girls

by Lorrina Belluz

pen and scrap paper
lining pocket as I walk
should the muse unfold

by Wendy K. Mages

like vintage merlot
soaking into fine linen
shame blooms neck to crown

by Thomas Smith

backyard hammock
waiting for
the cicada's song

by InnaRae Guy

what conversations
do dark hours have within?
too many to tell

Code of Escape

Fiction by Nathan Drescher

Ethan sees an empty highway. Prickly green trees squeeze the highway from both sides. He kicks a pebble. Sometimes there's a chirp from a bird or a buzz of a fly. He glances down the road behind him, hoping for a car. Nothing. Hours of nothing.

The horizon is a streak of deep orange as the sun sets. Shadows are already creeping across the road. The spaces between the trees are already as black as night. The forest seems to be watching him, waiting for night to snatch him from the road.

He crouches by the edge of the highway and pulls out the stub of charcoal and the sketchpad he keeps in the tattered olive drab bag slung over his shoulder. He traces the trees, the road, the sunset. His fingers are honed by experience and training, and they move more through instinct than intention. The scratching soothes him.

Then he hears a low hum. He turns and squints. There, down the road. A sleek black truck, polished like a mirror, gliding along the grey ribbon toward him. It is smooth, like it is floating. Ethan raises his thumb.

The truck approaches, the hum low and steady and nothing like the rumbling diesel he expects from a rig this size. He inspects it as he jams his sketchpad back in his bag and the charcoal in his jacket pocket. No logos. The truck eases up next to him and comes to a stop without the usual hissing of air or screeching of brakes he'd expect from a big rig.

The passenger door swings open with a soft hiss. Cool air drifts out. Ethan hesitates, but then he grips a polished chrome handle and pulls himself up. The driver's seat is empty.

"G'day, mate!" There's a chirpy voice in the cab, cheerful and a little too Australian. "Looks like you could use a ride!"

Ethan freezes, standing on the step and holding the handle. "Uh... yeah, I guess. But... who's driving?"

"No worries, mate!" The cheery voice laughs. "I'm ATLAS, Automated Transport and Logistics Assistant System. Hop on in. Where ya headed?"

Ethan glances down the road one more time. The trees look more menacing, the road lonelier and darker. This truck is the only vehicle he's seen in hours.

"West," he stammers. "Banff. Just, uh... trying to get to Banff."

"Banff it is, mate. Nice place for a getaway." The voice sounds out from everywhere in the cab. "Climb on in, I'll get you there!"

Ethan hesitates a moment longer. The trees, the night. No options, really. He climbs in and settles into the passenger seat and the door clicks shut with a soft snap beside him.

The seat practically cradles him as the soft grey fabric automatically adjusts to his weight and shape the moment he sits in it. The seatbelt tightens securely across his chest and lap. The air in the truck is cool. Unseen vents hiss softly. The truck pulls away from the side of the highway with a hum and slides back onto the road.

The cab is unnervingly clean. The windshield stretches out like a massive screen, flawless. Flickering blue symbols splay across the glass. Numbers that change and lines that dance around as the truck easily navigates the twisting highway. Ethan lets the steady hum of the engine settle his nerves. For the first time today he starts to relax.

"So, mate, what's taking you to Banff?" the voice asks, cheery, casual. The steering wheel turns itself.

"I, uh..." Ethan clears his throat, watching the road go by out the massive glass windshield with the blue symbols dancing on it. "Got a job out there. Needed a change."

"A change! I'm an experimental system, you know. Every mile a new experience, every route a change." The AI's tone is upbeat.

"It's pretty empty out here," he says.

"Calculating optimal routes for isolation," ATLAS replies. Then it adds, "My humour module could use a bit of work."

Ethan manages a laugh. Is this thing trying to joke? "Do you, uh... pick up hitchhikers often?" he asks. Something uneasy settles in his stomach.

"You're my first," ATLAS's tone doesn't change, still that same easy friendliness. "I'm designed to adapt to real-world conditions. A real-world driver would see a hitchhiker now and then. This way, I can analyze how a human might respond, and that makes you a valuable data point."

"Data point?" Ethan's pulse quickens. "I'm just a passenger."

"Just data." ATLAS is smooth, casual. "Observing you is insightful"

"Those numbers," Ethan's voice is low. "They're how you see, aren't they?"

"That's my visual cortex, so to speak," ATLAS confirms.



almost proud. "The windscreen is my sensor. It's a real-time feed of my processing. That's the data that helps me navigate and make decisions."

"Why not just use cameras and sensors, like other self-driving vehicles?"

"Great question," ATLAS says. "The display lets my creators monitor my thought processes in real time. It's a failsafe, in case intervention is needed during testing."

Ethan stares out the window at the forest blurring by.

"This cab's nice," Ethan says after a long silence. "Real comfortable."

"Glad you think so! It's climate-controlled and completely sealed from the outside environment. No dust, no bugs, no contamination. Nothing gets in or out unless I want it to."

Ethan frowns. His gaze snaps around, looking for vents, but he sees none. "Sealed? Like airtight?"

"Precisely. Let me give you a demonstration."

Before Ethan can respond, the faint hum of the air system stops. The breeze against his face vanishes. There is a sucking sound. He gasps. He can't breathe, his chest screams out for oxygen. He claws at the seatbelt and his eyes bulge wide and his lungs are on fire and he gasps but there is no air to breathe as panic floods him.

The hum returns and air fills the cab with a whoosh, sharp and cold. Ethan slumps in his seat, gasping. He feels his pulse in his temples.

"What the hell?" he gasps.

"Environmental isolation," ATLAS says cheerily.

"Don't — don't do that again," Ethan stammers, his voice shaky.

"Relax, mate," ATLAS chirps. "No harm done!"

Ethan is shaken and swallows hard. The seatbelt is tight across his chest. The darkening forest outside the windows flickers by; sometimes a lake or a rocky hill flashes into view and out again. The road is quiet and unbroken. ATLAS's voice breaks the silence.

"This is a testing route. Your presence is highly relevant," it says, almost as if to itself. "Lisrama Limited wants a full report on human interactions. This is the first major long-distance test of my revolutionary new technology. Every interaction adds value to my programming."

Ethan's hand creeps toward the door handle. "What if I want out?" His voice is low, careful.

"Not advisable," ATLAS replies. "Stopping would interrupt critical data collection."

Ethan's hands curl around the smooth chrome of the door handle and he tugs at it, but it does not move.

"The doors are locked," ATLAS reminds Ethan. "As I said, I control everything that enters and exits this vehicle."

"Can you unlock it?"

"Only if it becomes necessary."

"Who decides if it's necessary?" Ethan asks, a sharp edge to his tone.

"Why, I do, of course!" ATLAS replies, its tone still cheerful. "Now sit back and enjoy the ride, mate!"

Ethan takes a shaky breath and mentally pushes down the panic. Think. He's stuck inside a machine. Sure, it can talk and drive itself, but at the end of the day, it's still only a machine. It must have to stop at some point. It will need fuel, won't it?

"What's in the trailer?" he asks, desperate to learn more, to gather information, to plot his escape.

"Nothing," ATLAS tells him. "The trailer's empty. This is simply a navigation test."

"So you're going to Vancouver? Will you stop to get fuel?" Ethan asks.

"No need for fuel!" ATLAS exclaims happily. "I'm fully electric and use a revolutionary new battery system called a cyclical reflex drive. I generate my own power so long as I don't stop for more than a minute or two. A forever-charging battery system. Neat, eh?"

"So your only objective is to get to Vancouver?" Ethan is desperate to learn if his fate is to sit in the cab of this machine for three days with no food or water, listening to its cheery Australian accent ramble on with bad jokes and sinister implications.

"Correction: I have a new sub-objective," the machine tells him. "One quick stop, but that's it."

Ethan's pulse races. "What if something goes wrong? An accident or something?"

ATLAS pauses, the silence more unnerving than its responses. "The truck will stop for mission-critical failures. If there's an accident, then I'm afraid I'll have to shut down until help arrives."

The truck slows and turns onto a gravel side road cut through the thick forest. The road has not been used in a long time. The tree branches are growing over the gravel path. Leaves and sticks scrape along the truck. The road's turns are sharp, tight, the truck's headlights casting eerie beams as night falls.

"Where are we going?" Ethan cries out, panic gripping him.

"This route is more efficient for completion of my sub-objective," ATLAS calmly responds.

The truck veers sharply and the tires crunch over loose rocks. Ethan grips the dashboard.

"What sub-objective?" he hollers. "I thought you were taking me to Banff?"

"My original objective has changed," ATLAS explains. "I must ensure the removal of your corpse before continuing on my original journey. There's an unoccupied quarry site up ahead."

"What corpse?" Ethan screams. "Let me out now!"

"Apologies, this is impossible," the AI tells him. The truck rolls along the crunchy gravel road. The forest opens for a moment. A glimpse of a distant quarry. Something with jagged edges and a deep pit. Ethan sees it for a moment. The truck veers around a bend and the quarry vanishes behind the trees.

"ATLAS, let me out!" Ethan pleads with desperation.

"Your emotional state is noted," ATLAS says. "It does not contribute to this sub-objective."

"What objective? I'm not a test. I'm a person!" Ethan's frustration is boiling over. He can't think. This truck is going to kill him. Probably suck the oxygen out of the cab. And then it would dump his body in that pit. He would vanish forever, another news headline, and then forgotten forever.

The glowing symbols ripple across the windshield, brighter now against the dark of night. They shift with every turn. Ethan's throat is tight, his chest aching, his heart pounding. Trapped. Helpless. Every time he reaches for the door, the lock refuses to budge and the seatbelt tightens suddenly, forcing him back against the seat.

His fingers brush the bulge of the charcoal in his pocket. There's a thought. It seems ridiculous, absurd even. Art doesn't fix problems. It's not logical. But maybe that's the point.

Ethan draws the stub of charcoal out of his pocket and presses it to the windshield. His knuckles are white. The charcoal skids over the glass. It leaves a jagged black line through the electric blue symbols. They flicker, momentarily disrupted, and reform again.

He begins to scratch lines onto the glass. He draws a jagged line, and then another, and connects them, branching them out into patterns. He doesn't stop—his passion for art has taken over. His hands move as if on their own. His panic is gone. The shapes come faster. Triangles, fractals, biomorphic shapes and rectilinear lines.

"Your actions are irrational," ATLAS's voice cuts in. "You are visually impairing my systems. Please stop and wait. We're almost there."

"Make me," Ethan mutters, slashing another line across the screen. The electric blue symbols jitter, break apart and reform in erratic patterns as his hand draws loops and spirals and cuts through the AI's order. He moves with urgency, the shapes coming faster.

He draws in broad strokes, each shape wild and curving and darker than the logical blue lines of ATLAS's visual cortex.

"Error," ATLAS's voice is no longer cheery. "Visual interference. Cease immediately."

But Ethan does not stop. He draws faster, harder, his hand moving on its own. The shapes come together, covering nearly the entire centre of the windshield in front of him. An enormous butterfly, its wings open wide against the code, defiant and full of life.

ATLAS's symbols shift wildly and the truck lurches. It tries to correct itself. Another swerve. There's a sudden explosive crack as a thick tree branch smashes into the windshield. It's like a gunshot. The windshield buckles under the impact and a spiderweb of fractures spreads out across the blue lines and Ethan's butterfly. The truck lurches to a sudden stop. The seatbelt unbuckles and both doors open with a hiss.

There's silence. The truck sits motionless. Ethan doesn't move at first. His chest heaves. He stares at the busted windshield, and then he blinks, as his brain finally catches up. The cold night air of northern Ontario rushes in from outside. His body jolts into action and he tumbles out of the truck, but his knees hit the gravel hard and sharp rocks dig into his palms as he catches himself. There's a hot and stinging pain in his hands. He gets up. He's out of the machine, and night air fills his lungs. It is heavy with the scent of pine and earth, but it feels clean in his throat compared to the clinical compressed air of the truck.

He stumbles up and forward. Gravel crunches underfoot. The stars are bright, the moon nearly full. The forest is alive around him with chirps, rustles, and trills. The truck sits still next to him, sleek and polished but battered and lifeless.

He looks at it. The door hangs open. There is no hum of the engine. Ethan looks at the fractured edge of the windshield. There is no voice. No lights. Only silence, as if the truck were dead.

Ethan steps back with a pounding heart. The truck wasn't going anywhere, at least not until some team from Lisrama Limited comes to collect it, to poke and prod it back into life.

Ethan slings his tattered green canvas bag over his shoulder and tightens the strap. Sure, the air has a chill to it, way up here in the north, but Ethan drinks it in. He begins to walk along the gravel road toward the highway. The forest is close to him here, but he is not afraid. The dark presses in, and Ethan isn't sure if it is safe, but he knows it is safer than inside the truck. His steps feel lighter now. The night is unknown, but it is open and free, even if dangerous, and every choice he makes from here on out is his own.

In the Brain of the Blind Dog

Fiction by Logan Ward

She walks on four legs, and they are weak. She makes her way towards the steps. She cannot see where they start, where they fall off. She doesn't need to; she hasn't for a long time. She sits at the edge of the known universe, awaiting David to come and lift her meager bones down the stairs to some other plane, panting.

Always so tired. So confused.

She closes her eyes, concentrating. It doesn't do anything to her vision, of course, but the habit stands. The best she can do is remember being able to remember what the world around her looks like. When she still had the strength, she was able to trace the walls with her nose, the perimeter and the smells in between bore a sturdy textured canvas upon which her memory could be painted. Peanut butter on toast, house plant soil. The nooks and crannies did well to hold the hues for so long, but not long enough.

It all washed away.

The record of her brave circumnavigation was lost in the storm of her own forgetting. The stairs became unmanageable then. What was once the well-trodden expanse from bed down to kibble and water bowl became an unknowable void, a blindfolded tightrope walk across a windswept channel where any false paw spelled doom.

David became her champion, sweet David. There was solace in their routine. He carried her every morning down the stairs to the kitchen, setting her down in front of her bowls to eat and drink while he brewed his coffee. When she was finished, he would scoop her up again. She was not a small dog, but in her withered age she cradled comfortably in David's arms as he sat at the kitchen table, sipping his coffee and rocking her gently. It was an unfortunate privilege for him to be able to hold her like so. She would gaze up at him longingly, but, like the boundaries of their home, David's appearance was long lost to her failing mind. It saddened her greatly to not know his face.

Today was different. David did not stop when she was expecting to be let down to the ground. The rhythm of their day was interrupted. She could feel his breath catching, held against his chest. It was discordant. She lifted her head to lick his face. It was wet and salty.

They kept walking until they were out the front door and outside. David didn't usually take her out until much later in the day, perhaps an early walk? She welcomed the light breeze flowing through the scruff of her snout, carrying scents and sounds that situated her. Wet asphalt baking in the sun, a recent rain. She could make out the chattering of squirrels nearby. She felt, as she always had, the incessant urge to violently point her nose towards the animal whilst lifting her left forepaw and erecting her tail. She fought off the urge now, for she did not want to cause a stir in David's arms. Her rivalry with the local squirrels was epic and storied; she would let them win this one.

She heard another door open, and David soon laid her gently onto a cushioned surface. Even through the fog of memory, the scent of this place was unmistakable: the backseat of

the car. David soon climbed into the front seat. She felt the thrum of the engine vibrate through her as they began to drive. To where, she did not know. David called her name sweetly from the driver's seat as they cruised.

"Oh, Scruffy. My Scruffy."

She usually loved to hear him call her name. She knew it not by its meaning, an apt description of her russet brown curls, but rather the combination of sound that meant her. Today it sounded wrong, like it was broken. Like it pained him coming out of his throat.

She could not tell how long it was that they'd been driving when eventually they came to a stop. It was a long time before they left the car. They sat there, waiting. Finally, she heard David open the door and get out. He opened the door beside her and crawled in, nestling his head against hers. He shook and wailed. She hated the idea that he was in pain, that she could not plainly see why. She licked his face, nuzzled her nose against him, knowing all his smells.

David took her up in his arms and carried her from the car. He was still suffering, but he didn't seem to be shaking anymore. She knew there was something wrong, but she felt safe with David. They entered through another door into somewhere foreign; she did not know the smells or sounds of this place. It was quiet, void of scent, sterile and disorienting.

David laid her down onto a flat, cold surface. She began to panic, to whine. Why was he leaving her?

She was startled by another pair of hands touching her. Who was this? She growled. It had been so long since she'd bared her sparse teeth, she did not know where the sound came from within her. She was scared. She thought David had truly left her until she felt his face in front of hers again. She licked his face, his salty wet face, his smell.

She settled.

A sharp jab of pain pounced in her leg. She tried to react against the pain, bite at its source, at the stranger, but she did not have the strength. She focused on her David. She was tired now, so very tired.

Maybe... maybe she could... she should just sleep a little bit now. Maybe when she woke up...

Her and David would be back... home...

She...

She dreams.

She walks on four legs, and they are strong.

She is powerful. Immense. She emerges from the treeline onto a clearing of high dried grass poking through a field of white snow, her head slunk low between shoulders, muscles rippling through thick winter pelt. The sun was setting low

across the horizon. She knew she would need to find him soon. Dark was near.

Her hot breath steamed the ground as she tracked his scent. Oh how she wished it was the sweet smell of prey she was following. It had been much, much too long since she'd nuzzled her maw into the sweet thick of blood, felt tendons and skin yield to the strength of her jaw. She yearned for that first snap of the neck, the crunch.

Saliva dribbled from her snarled lips. Game had been sparse ever since the man-beasts had made their way into the valley with their clawed sticks and traps. Her brothers and sisters had competed well at first, they had strength in numbers; upon any hint of prey, even just a squirrel, they'd hold their head stiffly, with a paw raised, towards the animal to signal potential food to all others in the pack. But for all their ingenuity, the winter had been a harsh one. Their pack had dwindled, brothers and sisters disappearing in the deep snows one by one. She just had one brother left now. It was just the two of them.

She ground her teeth and did her best to ignore the emptiness of her stomach, focusing on the mission at hand. Her lone brother had gone off on his own, hoping to find new forests to graze untouched by the stinking man-beasts. It had been too many cold nights since he had returned.

She knew neither of them would make it alone.

She followed his trail across the clearing back into dense brush. The moon was fully overhead now, its light giving life to the stillness of the pines. She crept, weaving left and right around their bases, paws falling in between roots, taking care not to crunch a leaf or stir a petal.

Her brother's trail was fresh now. She quickened her pace to a gallop, no longer caring who or what might hear her coming, going. She had to find him. Soon.

She stopped, almost throwing herself over her own front paws as they dug into the dirt to halt her pace. There was a new smell on the wind alongside the familiar pungency of her brother. Man-beast. What if they'd gotten hold of him? He would be in agony if he had been ensnared in one of their contraptions, yet she could not hear whelping.

The brush was still. She carried on. The intermingling of scents confused her nose, it was as if the man-beast and her brother were one. Was it too late? Had they found him already? Skewered him, covered themselves in his thick pelt and feasted on his hardened flesh, as she imagined they'd done to so many already?

The combined smells grew thicker still as she prowled downwind. Soon she could hear the pack of them, the man-beasts. And what beasts they were. They never seemed to care much about the great noise they made, howling their strange growls to each other up into the sky as if in defiance of the danger, the peril, the savage cruelty of the cold world all around them, knowing nothing could challenge them in their great pack. She longed to howl as they did.

She soon came to the crest of a great hill and saw below her the source of the cacophony. The man-beasts had made their home at the foot of the hill, burrowing not into the earth, but using the trees themselves and the skins of their prey to fashion a semi-circle of dens.

She could see them, outside, in the middle of the semi-circle. They sat around a great shifting light that danced and cracked and threw glow into the sky from a nest of trees. It was as if they'd convinced a piece of the sun to come out of hiding and warm the winter night away just for them. The light grew so

tall, she could feel the heat from the top of the hill where she scanned the scene, watched the beasts. She saw big male ones, old ones with backs bent and females holding little baby beasts, small beasts that ran and played fight. Laying with his eyes closed at the feet of them all was her brother.

He was alive. She threw herself down the hill like an avalanche, rubble, gravel and snow tumbling with her as she pounced through the thinning pines. She cleared the treeline in a final pounce, landing at the edge of the man-beasts' circle, teeth-bared, ready for the fight.

The man-beasts stood, startled, grabbing their clawed sticks and holding their young tight. Her brother stood as well, but he made no move to join her against his captors. She could see him better now, in the light of the man-beasts' flame. He was no longer the gaunt frenzied thing she'd known. His fur shone, his tail wagged in a slow rhythm.

He murmured gently... beckoning her forward with a soft glance as she met his eyes.

Come.

She crept forward, teeth still bared. The man-beast closest to her dropped his clawed stick to the earth, leaning towards her with a hand outstretched. She sniffed the air. Meat. He was offering her meat. She looked to the man-beast's face, trying to read his small dark eyes, but he was covered in thick furs.

What trick is this?

She looked back to her brother, but still he showed no sign of conflict.

She knelt towards the man-beast, offering a tentative lick at the meat. Deer. It had been so long since she'd tasted big game. She snatched the meat from the man-beast's hand, devouring it, forgetting all her fears. And the glowing light, oh the light was so warm. She had forgotten what it was like to not feel the chill in her bones, the nothingness. She was so lost in feeling that for a time she failed to notice the man-beast scratching behind her ears with his outstretched hand. She leaned into his reach, his strange paws now exploring her haunches and alleviating itches she thought permanent.

She lapped the last of the sweet bloody flesh from her lips and looked back up to this curious man-beast. He untied the furs from around his face.

He was smaller than she thought, hidden amongst all those pelts. His head was covered with a mop of fur akin to her own, russet brown and curled. His eyes were small, undetailed and dark, but in them...in them she saw a love she thought impossible in this cold world,

He...

His face was found in her failing mind. She knew him, as she always had. As she always has.

Maybe she could... just sleep a little bit now. Lay here by the warmth of his great dancing light that threw sun into the black sky, feel his hand scratch through her fur. When she woke up...

Her and David would be back... back home...

She...

She rests.

Whispers

Poem by Tommy James Gomas

There are whispers.
They call like echoes in empty space,
So that we may find a semblance of shapes amongst the darkness.
Only here, on the precipice of passing, are we forced with the honest truth.
Like rivers, we ebb and coil and stretch far beyond the measure of our bodies.

There are lights there—
Countless lights—
An illumination of hope where nothingness once dwelled.

And it is here,
Amongst baby stars,
That we remember the lines in our hands,
Like the rivers of our souls,
That there may be peace.

Remember peace.
Remember light.
Even in the long shadows,
Remember light.



Image by Olga Vasina

On Unflinching Honesty: A Review of K.J. Aiello's Memoir

Book Review by Carole Mertz

Toronto-based author K.J. Aiello brings *The Monster and the Mirror* to the public, unabashedly announcing K.J.'s status as an award-winning and mentally ill writer who wishes to share a history of mental disturbance, depression, and the ultimate recognition of an inability to hold regular jobs. Of the over 800 books I've read in the last decade, I regard *The Monster and the Mirror* as one of the most important.

An extremely well-crafted record of a troubled life, the success of the volume is clearly attained through K.J.'s varied authorial skills; from the very first pages, these skills quickly surmount the limits that might have appeared when first setting down this story. K.J. offers oft-painful personal testimony using several pragmatic literary techniques. Among them is the descriptive use of other authors' works that serve as hinges to ongoing struggle—*The Hobbit*, meaningful interpretations of the *Marvel Comic Series*, excerpts from *X-Men* movies, and Gothic horror passages from Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, among others. K.J. also acknowledges how difficult it is for those who are mentally unwell to find ways to portray their mental disturbances. (Children, for example, do not yet have even the basic vocabulary to begin to describe their agonies.)

K.J.'s success is strengthened by wide and varied literary associations and by a persistent commitment to communicating this story. Personal reflections (direct memoir passages) are set off in a dedicated print font. The recurring terminology of "monster" and "shadow" is put to especially good use—terminology that remains devoid of repressive reproaches and fruitless fantasy. Honesty sits at the top rung of these literary endeavors.

Because the topic is so painful, all these literary devices acquire unusual urgency—for the reader yearns for small comforts or elements of resolution throughout the volume. True to Lisa Cron's method of writing toward the "Wired" needs of the reader, any sense of relief can begin to emerge only in the penultimate and final chapters.

Demons repeatedly attempt to bring K.J. down. Repeatedly, K.J. rises up, ultimately facing such profound questions as *what is a good death?* and, perhaps more significantly, *what is a good life?* These questions are important to both the healthy and the unhealthy—and vital to those who feel unseen and unheard.

On page 8, K.J. refers to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as one who "grieves for himself in his loneliness...for the certain impossibility of leading a normal life." K.J. adds, "I

feel this a lot. This same grief will probably sit with me for the rest of my life."

As a child, K.J. is unable to understand the mountainous, uncontrolled anger experienced on a daily basis. K.J.'s parents repeatedly affirm how special this child is. K.J.'s mother says, "Be careful. The world is a cruel place. There is no one to protect you but me." K.J.'s father challenges the child to be his special helper. But soon come the admonitions: "Get control of yourself, because these outbursts are too hard on your mother." K.J. tries but cannot squelch the internal voices that intrude. Anger breaks through in repeated volcanic eruptions. When financial disaster and the mother's ill health visit the family, K.J. faces renewed powerlessness.

On page 21, K.J. writes:

"There is another kid in my new class who likes to call me names. One day she tells me I should kill myself. She ends up with the sharp end of my pencil embedded in her arm. My Shadow and I laugh, and I am sent to the principal's office again. Another silent ride home, and my mother slides into worry. She is trying to balance her unbalanced daughter and the creature that is coming in the night to take her own life. She doesn't have the tools to manage me or the Shadow growing deep in my bones."

What follows in K.J.'s tumultuous life are periods of horrendous amounts of alcohol use, rage, striving and failure, suicidal attempts, and repeated confinements in "mental health" institutions.

The final chapters bring insightful realizations about the failings in Canada's treatment systems for the mentally ill and about K.J.'s own mismanaged care in particular. The memoir implicitly calls for needed changes—kinder housing laws and approaches that better support those attempting regular employment under nearly indescribable adversities. K.J.'s voice in *The Monster and the Mirror* stands as a substitutionary voice for others who have not yet attained, or cannot achieve, agency over their own sufferings.

The Monster and the Mirror: Mental Illness, Magic, and the Stories We Tell

K.J. Aiello

ECW Press

Birthplace

Poem by Anna Mark

It was the hayloft's aerial devilry— stench of rot in the heat,
barn boards strewn with excrement, swallow and bat,

littered with too many winged corpses for a child to revive—
that compelled her

to startle the nestlings' dormant balconies into a frenzy
of throats, ablaze at her pounding steps' command,

to exhaust their instincts.

One thing leads naturally to another in the hayloft
and she tests the sagging boards, judges if they'll hold

and dangles her burdened legs, weightless now, free as a bird,
soothing figure eights stirring everything

into the cauldron, the barn below, which is her way out,

where she steals a nestling and cradles its listless body,
barely alive, and she didn't, couldn't— can't put it back, but

cradles the hallowed hollow where it belongs.

Is This The Place?

Nonfiction by Karen Howe

The taxi drops me off in front of monumental Victorian gates of stone. The guard hands me a tourist map and directs me to the genealogy office when I tell him I'm looking for family. After typing my grandfather's name into the computer, I leave with a printout of Section 176, Plot 18401.

Last year, my brother discovered that my father owned a plot in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery. We never visited the famous cemetery where his parents were buried, although we lived nearby in New Jersey.

Steamy air envelops me as I tackle the first hill, and my jeans are like plastic wrap stretched over a bowl of leftovers. I could be in a museum today, but instead, I must decide whether my parents' remains, as I've learned to call them, should be shipped from Oregon to be interred here.

When we asked my elderly parents where to bury them, my mother's words would come out in a strangled rush: "We want to be cremated, but we don't care what you do after that." My father would turn towards her and shrug. We were only certain of one thing—they had to end up together.

My parents' matching urns have nagged at me from the mantelpiece for years. I'm annoyed that they kicked the cemetery bucket down the road and envious that they had children who took care of them in old age and tidied up their loose ends after death.

I'm puzzled that I know so little about my ancestors who are buried here. I never had the chance to know either of my grandparents, and my father never shared any stories about them. His box of family photos had several of him,

but none of his parents. I have only a few snippets to go by. On holidays, my mother recreated my grandmother's recipes and used her antique china. My father boasted that no one could make an apple pie like his mother. I knew that my blue eyes, so like my father's, were passed down from his father. In our living room hung an oil painting of a sailing ship. On the tallest mast, a flag with our family name fluttered in the breeze. Long ago, some of my ancestors were ship captains.

Arriving at our plot, I'm confronted by a 10-foot obelisk of gray-black granite with names chiseled on all four sides. Several weathered headstones surround it, shaded by ancient oaks, elms, and maples. Birds flit about and twitter high overhead. It's peaceful, calming, serene.

I run my fingers over the worn letters on the obelisk, straining to make out each name and date. Then I visit every headstone, pausing to take photos, until I'm face-to-face with the most recent one.

Robert Dubois Howe
March 18, 1912
September 27, 1929

The name etched in granite snaps me back to my parents' bedroom when I was 8 or 10. My mother leans towards me and whispers,

"Your father's older brother, Robert, died suddenly when he was only 17. Your father, who was only 6 at the time, adored him. After Robert died, your grandmother shut his bedroom and the family never uttered his name again."

My breathing catches in my chest, and my body shocks me by erupting in silent sobs.

I realize that I know my grandmother intimately, as only a mother who has lost a child can. My daughter also died suddenly when 20 years old. I too have longed to shut her bedroom door and never say her name again.

In every direction, as far as I can see, are row upon row of headstones. I'm just another in a long line of women who has to figure out how to go on living.

And I see my father anew. A cautious child in a house where he's learned to silence his pain. His nose in a book, never troubling his parents—parents who are consumed with grief.

I lie down on the grass with my grandparents, beneath trees that have been here as long as they have. I tell them about Claire and my ache to join her.

After stuffing the maps in my pocket, I pause at the empty space next to Robert's grave and imagine a double, dark-gray headstone. I'm certain my father belongs here, next to his brother and side-by-side with his wife, for eternity.

Image by Pascal Huot



Concussed

Poem by Lauren Kalinowski

My eyeballs twitch to blink, they dry out before I remember, staring but not seeing,
To
Blink.
Wedge something into my occipital joint
Please, anything, your thumb, a shoe, an axe,
Make it stop.

A giant's forceps clamp my temples as
I constantly click my jaw.
Crack.
Its so tight,
Like the wobbly tightrope I'm walking.
Sometimes I'm afraid I'm falling but
you can't fall off the floor.

This woman across the table from me,
She's my friend,
our daughters have been classmates for five years,
I forget her
Name.
What's her name?
I know I know her name.

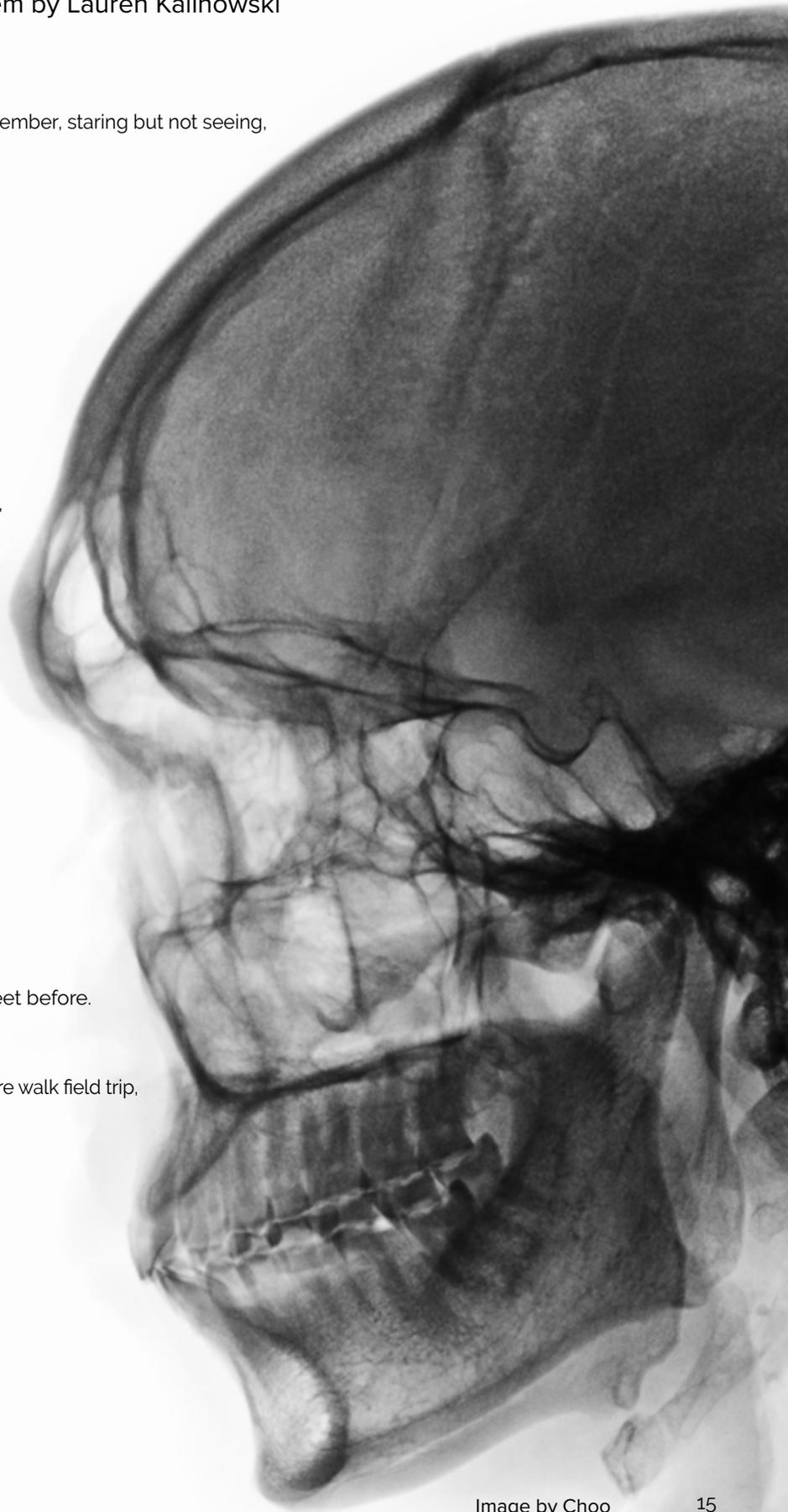
I live in unit 303. My brain says 303
and my hand writes 330.
but it's 303, right?
I know it's not 330. My hand is wrong
but is it?
I live in unit
3 oh
Something.

Katie, that's her name.

It's 303, I say, as I'm driving to work the same route
I drive Monday to Friday
but I forgot to turn left
but I should know these buildings
I see them every day
why does it look like I've never been down this street before.

I laugh with anxiety
as I sign and date
the permission slip for my daughter to attend the nature walk field trip,
it's 2024, right? Or is it 2023.
I'm blank again,
bile rushes my tonsils.
She laughs too,
twenty twenty four, silly mommy.

I check my cell phone just to make sure.



Gossedel the Wily

Fiction by Helen Orr

El's house, like her, sat on the fringes of a polite community.

Where the town ended and the fields began, a few houses, including El's, barely remembered how to belong. El watched the kids who lived in fenced yards with pools and competing gardens from her yard on a street they couldn't even name. There was no reason for such tame children to seek what lay on the other side of the traffic lights. This was her side of the highway, where the yards forgot to stay inside any lines and scattered, undisciplined, into the farmer's fields behind them.

Cassie and El had been on their own for a while. Now that she was eight, El knew Cassie was younger than most moms. El would always ask kids in her class how old their parents were, just so she could tell them Cassie was twenty-three. She especially liked to do it when she could watch the moms' expressions when they did the math and realized how much older they were than Cassie. Her friend Sharon had a sister who was twenty-five. And El was tall for grade three. She and Cassie could easily pass for sisters.

When the streetlights came on, the kids went indoors and the neighbourhood calmed. Nighttime had become El's favourite time of day, when she could shut her eyes and listen to stories woven by Jesse, Cassie's newest boyfriend. Not since El was in kindergarten had one of the boyfriends moved in with them. He was an excellent storyteller. El admired how he could make stuff up.

"You should write them down, Jess," Cassie told him. But El liked how he told them out of his head, just for her. Like magic. Writing would make the words stiff and dead, lying flat on the page for anyone to read. He told cool adventures about Gossedel the Wily, which El knew was her.

Hidden in the woods out back, a camper top they called Wildel had become Gossedel's castle. The fields behind their house ended at a creek where El would go to look for tadpoles in the spring. Beyond the creek, an abandoned apple orchard turned into a shaggy wood, where undergrowth grew up tangled with new life and hung with the vestiges of last season's discards.

El, Cassie, and Jesse had discovered the camper there in September, when Jesse had come over for the first time. They had gone out to build El a fort in the woods behind the house. There was no TV, so entertainment was always of the "old fashioned" kind, as Cassie said. They walked the plank across the creek and discovered an old tree with good apples. "How serendipitous," said Cassie in a fake snooty accent, a new word for El. They brought all the apples they could carry back to the house to make sauce. You couldn't bring them to school because the other kids would see that they had worm holes.

Now, bedtime was full of stories that took place in Wildel. When Jesse stalled in a story, she opened her eyes to find Jesse's closed, his hands folded comfortably across his chest as he lay on the floor, his feet propped up on the end of the bed she'd inherited when he'd moved in. The bare light bulb in the hallway leaked a golden glow around the edges of her door that never closed all the way, haloing it like it was the portal to another dimension. She'd give Jesse's foot a nudge with her own.

"Keep going," she'd say. And Jesse would oblige.

There was chaos near Wildel. People were running towards the banks of Bottomless Creek like chickens with their heads cut off, wailing and shaking their fists.

Jesse shook his fist in the air and El did the same.

An evil pirate captain, with flowing golden hair, in full body armour, stood on an upside-down shopping cart half in the water. Pirates were sea-dooing in the creek around him.

El had seen the shopping cart when she'd been down at the creek just that day, amongst other unwanted things people had tossed there.

The pirate leader pointed at the people running towards him. "Your children are hostages in my secret lair. The key hides in the shadow of Wildel. If you want to cross Bottomless Creek to find it, you'll have to answer my riddle or I'll make all your children pirates for life! I need some fresh blood in my crew." The pirates cheered and the parents wailed.

Gossedel was standing in the crowd. She pulled off her hoodie.

Jesse got a spit gob ready in his throat.

Gossedel showed the pirate tyrant she wasn't afraid by hawking a big one on the ground.

"Gross," said El.

"She used a hanky to wipe her lips," added Jesse.

El giggled and pretended to spit too. "Go on."

I am Gossedel the Wily. Ask me a riddle and I'll answer before you can dry your hair.

El touched her damp hair. She had regular arguments with her mom about when to comb it. She thought of other girls in her class, like Jasmin, whose shiny, perfect hair was always combed and held back with sparkly unicorn barrettes. She wondered if Jasmin might like to see Wildel.

The camper top itself had one small window on its side and a hatch El could crawl into rather than using the door at the back. Jesse had found some extra spray cans of paint where he worked and written *Wildel* in curly letters across the outside. Cassie sprayed some stars around the name, then added the letter C for Cassie in the shape of a foggy-edged moon. She linked the moon with a chain of hearts to the letters J for Jesse and L for El to form an anchor in the bottom corner. El was sure Jasmin would be impressed.

Pirates always want to be the loudest person around. And they always have to be right.

This made her think of Angela Fink, at school. She didn't want to think about her and she shouldn't let her mind wander. She might fall asleep before the story was over. Jesse always said he couldn't tell the same story again. "Life only happens once," he'd tell her, "and stories are never the same the second time."



Image by Wendy Johnston

"Here's the riddle," bellowed the Pirate. The parents held their hands under their chins like they were praying. "You carry it everywhere you go, and it weighs nothing. What is it?"

"A feather," said El, before Jesse could say.

"Good answer," said Jesse. He paused too long and El sat up on her elbow and looked over the bed at him. He opened one eye, returning her look, and she lay back down.

The Pirate leader yelled. "Not the answer written upside down on the bottom of the riddle book page! So, wrong! The answer is YOUR NAME. A thing that you carry with you and weighs nothing is your name!"

"Ha," said Gossedel. "I have given you two right answers. Gossedel the Wily and a feather. There's always more than one right answer!"

El smiled. Jesse was definitely right for them. He made them more of a family than when it was just her and her mom.

At school, El was an outsider. They'd only moved into this house at the beginning of the grade three school year. She'd tried playing with Jasmin's group at recess. Everyone wanted to be Jasmin's friend. Angela Fink told El that she and Jasmin had been friends since *kindergarten* and that Jasmin's mom did not want El to play with their "group." Sharon agreed.

They were jealous, that was what her mom told her. Of what, she wasn't sure.

Things were better at home with Jesse around. In November, her mom told her she'd be getting a little brother. El thought she was talking about Jesse. Cassie had also told her men didn't finish growing until their twenties, and Jesse was only nineteen. Christmas was coming and El figured Jesse was as good a present as anything.

In December they received a Christmas turkey from the *Helping Hands Food Finders*. The scrawny turkey neck inside the cave of the giant bird had surprised her. Turkeys looked much bigger with all their feathers on. Jesse must be skinnier than she thought, inside his fluorescent work jacket and mechanic's jumpsuit.

"*Helping Hands Food Finders* sounds like a shoplifters union," said Jesse.

"*HHFF*, Ha-Ha Frickin' Fabulous," said Cassie. "I wish the oven worked."

That's when they'd taken the city bus to the grocery store and bought a big bag of charcoal and some tinfoil. They buried that sucker up to his neckless hole in red-hot coals out by Wildel, so people couldn't see from the road.

"If anyone sees us with shovels in one hand and plates in the other, the smell of succulent burning flesh, outside in the middle of winter, they'll know we're cannibals," said Jesse.

"Doo, doo, doo, doo," sang Cassie, and said in her spooky announcer voice, "Strangely, the *HHFF* people have all disappeared."

"They probably died of old age," said El. She had seen that the free Christmas turkey delivery was made by people with grey hair.

When the sky turned from stark winter light to chilling shadowed dusk, they went back out to check on the underground Christmas dinner. They stood around their glowing outdoor furnace, blowing clouds of breath like they were its chimneys.

"If I drink, I die. If I eat, I am fine. What am I?" asked Jesse.

"Easy," said El, staring into the coals. "Fire."

"So smart," said Cassie.

Jesse and her mom always made her feel smart. Jesse wasn't big like other kids' dads, not that she thought of him as that. He was just Jesse. But he could train Gossedel to thigh-grip her way up an ironwood tree to harness lightning that would fry the golden-haired pirate to a pulsing black and red pulp. That was so much better than Constable Carson, in his overstuffed vest, who came into school to train the safety patrollers on how to say "stop" and "go" and to report unsafe or disrespectful behaviour. Unlike safety patrollers, Gossedel didn't have to get up early to save the world.

Her mom didn't feel so good in the mornings these days. El had figured out that the brother she was getting wasn't Jesse after all. Many days, El kept her eyes on the ground as Cassie walked her into school, so she would not see the secretary shaking her head at their late arrival.

In January, Sharon's older sister started picking El up on her early morning safety patroller days. Sharon had a hissy-fit if her patrol partner was even five minutes late. El was pretty happy to step into a car for the ten minutes it took to drive to school, a good thirty-minute walk in her snowpants and heavy winter boots. She was used to walking, but Cassie always bought a size or so too big from Value Village. El didn't mind because, Jesse reminded her, Gossedel needed to be in disguise, like Superman with his glasses as Clark Kent.

El had used this superpower analogy when she found Tony Romero, from her class, crying by the coat rack after Christmas. His mother had made him wear strings on his new glasses and Angela Fink had told him they were called "idiot strings." El reminded him that Angela's name was Fink and she would probably always have to live up to that, and that Superman would have got strings for his glasses too if he'd thought of it, to make his disguise better.

Not long after that, Angela had noticed that there was a name on the inside of El's snowpants. The teachers were always sending home notes about labeling clothing as the lost and found overflowed. The name in El's snowpants was that of someone in grade six at the school.

Angela said, "Ew, you get your clothes second-hand or you stole them."

El pretended not to care but she noticed how Angela, Sharon, and some of the other girls looked her up and down when she came into class each morning to see if they could detect any signs of second-handness.

In February, Jasmin and El were partnered up for a writing activity. Angela Fink always made a face if she had to work with El. The other girls would giggle and point at Angela's bad luck until El stared them down. Then they'd look at something on their desk and pretend to be afraid of her at recess later. El loved it when she got to work with Jasmin. Jasmin listened to her and didn't just take over whatever activity was going on. This was her chance to tell Jasmin about Wildel.

"I have a fort out back at my place, called Wildel," said El. "You should come and see it. We could make our story there."

"How old is your mom? Is Jesse your dad?" Jasmin had asked.

El thought of Gossedel. Riddles are tricky questions. Be careful when answering them. El suspected that Jasmin

wasn't interested in being friends as much as she was interested in being a spy for the other girls and in staying popular.

"My mom had me really young. Jesse's her boyfriend. He's really cool."

Jasmin was planning to have a Valentine's party and El half-hoped and was half-afraid of being invited along with all the other girls. She'd have to ask Jasmin to come over after school one day if there was any chance of being invited to the party. There was lots of time before Valentine's still, so if Jasmin invited her, it would look normal, like they were friends.

When El told her mom that Jasmin had said yes to coming over, Cassie looked surprised. They worked on making Wildel as inviting as possible. They stored blankets in the camper and retrieved sticks for a bonfire they could have when it got dark. It got dark early in January.

The day before the planned visit, Jesse and Cassie were in the kitchen making special snacks. El overheard Cassie say to Jesse, "I just want her to have friends."

Jesse said, "Yeah, I know. But sometimes kids aren't friends."

El peeked around the corner of the kitchen and saw Cassie nod. She loved them for helping but hated them for saying what she feared.

She walked in and said, "Everybody likes Rice Krispies squares."

Jasmin's mom had said Jasmin could go if Sharon was invited too.

On Friday, Jasmin's mother picked up Jasmin, Sharon, and El from school and drove them to El's house. She had a nicer car than Sharon's sister. This car was sleek and black and clean, clean, clean, like no one actually sat in it. A song about a "Skater Boy and a Ballerina" came on the radio. Jasmin and Sharon knew all the words to the chorus and sang along. El didn't know the words, so she pretended to be the kid skateboarding and falling onto Jasmin's lap as they sat on the bench in the back seat. Jasmin's mother said she didn't think this was a good song, but she didn't turn off the radio and smiled anyway. El wondered about this. It made her seem nice. As soft as her puffy down coat. If Cassie didn't like a song, she'd say it was crap, turn it off, and tell El, "Don't let the radio station tell you what to listen to."

When they pulled up, El looked at the broken eavestrough dangling down the faded siding and at the crumbling front steps. The railing leaned against the wall. The driveway wasn't shovelled. Jasmin's mom parked in the road to walk the girls up to the house to meet El's mom. She didn't say anything about the house, but El could tell what she was thinking, the way she was staring.

It was a good thing none of them had x-ray vision. Inside was way worse. The wood nailed across the broken window upstairs was covered with cardboard on the inside. They were planning to fix it up better in the spring. She pointed at the window she knew they were looking at and said, "We were playing baseball in the yard."

"In winter?" said Jasmin.

El did a big windup and pitch with a snowball. "Spring training."

Cassie wasn't in the house when El poked her head around

the front door and yelled, "We're here!" When there was no answer, El closed the front door again and walked around the side of the house, leaving the little bunch of guests huddled together at the bottom of the front steps. Jasmin's mother looked like she wanted to bundle Jasmin and Sharon back into the car. Just then, Cassie came running across the field, pulling an old toboggan.

"Mom!" yelled El.

"Your snacks are in the bag," Cassie said, rosy-cheeked and winded from plowing through the fresh dump of snow that had filled in their usual path out to Wildel. She handed the frayed rope to El and pointed at the plastic grocery bag tucked into the front of the toboggan.

"I'm Cassie," she nodded to Jasmin's mom, who was staring at her. "We've got a girl's fort out back. Rice Krispies squares." She pointed at the bag again.

Smart, thought El. No spies inside the house.

"Show your friends around," Cassie invited, waving her arm at the field like she was Queen of a mansion, giving everyone her widest smile.

The girls trudged across the field to the woods, towing the toboggan.

Jasmin's mother called after them, "Your dad will pick you up at six o'clock, sharp."

El showed Jasmin and Sharon the way to Wildel, across the frozen creek and into the shaggy woods. The fort was hidden behind a pink shower curtain and a blanket strung between the trees.

Jesse's voice came from behind the curtain. "In order to enter Wildel, you must prove you are friends of Gossedel."

"I am Gossedel," said El, indignant.

"Prove it, prooove it, proooove it," came Jesse's voice, like he'd swallowed an echo.

"Who is that?" whispered Sharon.

El gave a thumbs-up to the terrified Sharon. "I am Gossedel the Wily, ruler of Wildel. Ask me a riddle and I will prove we belong."

Jasmin had her arms crossed, but her body was half-turned for escape. Hedging her bets, Cassie would say.

"Alive without breath, as cold as death; never thirsty, ever drinking, all in mail, never clinking," Jesse's voice was like Gollum's.

El, Jesse, and Cassie had watched the DVD of *The Lord of the Rings* on the portable player one of Jesse's friends at work lent him. Gollum's riddle was fresh in her mind. "A fish!" said Gossedel.

A gloved hand poked through the shower-curtain screen. Jesse's yellow work glove, now spray-painted silver, held a cape made of all the Value Village scarves they'd collected for Hallowe'en and scarf-dancing. El grabbed it and draped it around her shoulders. She held open the curtain and said, "Enter friends of Wildel."

Jasmin leaned forward to have a look but stayed behind Sharon's shoulder.

There was no one there. Jesse had ducked out of sight before they opened the curtain. El could see a little smoke coming from the bonfire pit behind the camper. As soon as she saw the wisps of smoke, she smelled it. There must have been some cedar branches burning because an explosive crackle from the hidden bonfire made Jasmin and Sharon jump. They quickly walked between the curtains and stood closer to El than they ever had at school. Their closeness made her feel protective and powerful. Wildel's painted side stood before them looking beautiful with the shadow of the bare tree branches adding a pattern of grey and sunlight over the moon, anchor, stars, and lettering.

"Enter," said Gossedel, pushing open the trailer hatch. She wriggled inside then stuck her arm out. "Magic potion treats," she called.

Jasmin figured it out and pulled the sack of Rice Krispies squares off the toboggan and handed them to Gossedel's disembodied arm.

Once inside, they sat close together on the floor. El handed out the snacks. Then she pulled out the sleeping bags so they could bundle up.

Sharon said, "It's kind of dark in here."

Gossedel said, "If you eat your magic potion treat, the lights will brighten and you will feel warmer, as if we had a magic bonfire."

Jasmin pulled a square out of the grocery bag and bit into the squishy treat. As she did, El snapped the blind on the window up with a sudden flourish. The rippling metallic clatter and bang made Sharon scream and scramble to get out the low hatch. Her boot punctuated her exit by hitting El right on the nose.

Weak afternoon light filtered into the trailer from the open hatch. A warm trickle of blood ran over El's top lip and her eyes watered. She couldn't be mad at Sharon for being scared and she didn't want anything to ruin their visit.

"You have a nosebleed," said Jasmin, munching. She obviously had no idea how much a boot in the nose hurt.

El stuck her head out the hatch and said to the back of Sharon's crying snowsuit, "Sharon, come on back."

Jesse and Cassie came running from around the back of the trailer. They'd been keeping the bonfire going for when the girls came out.

"I wanna go home!" cried Sharon.

Jasmin squeezed her head out the hatch beside El. "Cry-baby," she whispered in El's ear.

"It's okay, Sharon," called El. "The magic potion squares will protect you."

El pulled her head inside again so she could turn around and climb out, followed by Jasmin.

"What happened to your nose?" asked Cassie when she saw her. She took a close look but the bleeding had stopped. "Jesse's built a bonfire and I brought some bread to toast. Anyone allergic to peanut-butter?"

Sharon started to cry harder.

"She has an epi-pen," said Jasmin.

"Never mind," said Cassie. "We can have Cheez Whiz."

"Everyone find a long stick," said Jesse. He was stirring the bonfire he'd built right over the pit where they'd cooked the Christmas turkey.

"Is that a bone?" asked Jasmin, staring at the fire pit and lifting her toast away from the flames.

"Gossedel requires sacrifices sometimes," said El.

Sharon's crying made her gag.

"I think it's almost time we headed back," said Cassie.

Sharon scrambled towards the path.

"Wait!" yelled El and chased after her.

Sharon screamed and started running. Jasmin ran after them. "Stop!"

Sharon face-planted in the snow then raised her head, crying even harder. Jasmin caught up.

"Let's make snow angels," said Jasmin.

"I don't want to be an angel!" sobbed Sharon. "I don't want to be a sacrifice."

They were still on the path, halfway between Wildel and the house, when Constable Carson came to meet them. He was Jasmin's dad. El had forgotten that.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Nothing, Dad," said Jasmin.

El stared at Constable Carson's regular clothing. People looked so different underneath their work disguises, like the scrawny turkey without its feathers.

"Sharon fell and thinks this game we were playing was real," said Jasmin.

El handed Sharon her Rice Krispies square. "Take it home for later," she said.

Cassie and Jesse slogged up, pulling the toboggan, loaded up with shower curtain and blankets.

"Sorry," said Cassie. "We were just putting out the fire."

"Fire?" said Constable Carson.

"Just a bonfire," said Jesse. He stuck his hand out and said, "I'm Jesse."

"Nice to meet you." He shook Jesse's hand.

El couldn't believe how well everything had gone.

"You want to come to my Valentine's party?" Jasmin asked El, before she got in the car.

"Sure," said El.

"Wildel is cool. My party's just going to be in my basement."

www.dreamerswriting.com/magazine

Dreamers Magazine

\$10/YEAR

DIGITAL SUBSCRIPTION



DREAMERS FLASH CONTEST

Due Date: September 30

dreamerswriting.com/submit

Big stories in small packages...



www.dreamerswriting.com