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# Three.

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BELLY OF TOKYO  
BY DAVID CHAU

BLABBERMOUTH  
BY MAUDE ABOUCHE

THE FOUNTAIN  
BY ALISON STEVENSON



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES

# Three.

THE 2023 PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE OF CANADA  
STUDENT AWARD FOR FICTION



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES



Penguin  
Random House  
Canada

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All pieces in *Three* are works of fiction. Most names, places, characters, and events are the product of the authors' imaginations, and any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. In those few instances when the authors mention real persons and reported events, it is within a similarly fictionalized context and should not be construed as fact.

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## Introduction

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I write to you this year from Tokyo. The winner of the 2023 Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction is David Chau for an excerpt from his novel *Belly of Tokyo*, a gritty depiction of the life of a boy and his family eking out their existence in this massive city. Tokyo and its oppressive heat, which I am experiencing daily, is a major character in David's novel.

Our two other winners are Maude Abouche's *Blabbermouth*, a fantastical fable of the perils of social media, and Alison Stevenson's *The Fountain*, which takes us into the mind of a brain surgeon in such a convincing manner that on first reading I wondered if the writer was a neuro-surgeon. Alison, a Toronto lawyer, was also a winner last year, an impressive accomplishment considering that all of the entries are judged "blind", with no names attached, and that our jury, as usual, was entirely different than last year.

That jury includes celebrated novelist Naben Ruthnum and Marianne Miller, a Creative Writing Certificate graduate and twice a winner of this contest, most recently in 2018. Marianne's winning entry that year was an excerpt from her novel *We Were the Bullfighters*, which will be launched by Dundurn next spring. Our third juror was Penguin Canada's Meredith Pal. Thanks to our jury and thanks Penguin Random House Canada for their generosity in making this award possible. Special thanks to Carla Kean and Elyse Martin.

Thanks also to my SCS colleagues Salman Kureishy, Karen Fraczkowski, Benjamin Wood, Lihua Gui, Igor Purwin, and Dean Catherine Chandler-Crichlow. And finally, thanks to our incredible instructors who guided these writers in writing these stories. Enjoy!

Lee Gowan  
Program Director, Creative Writing  
University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies



Each year, we continue to be inspired by the learners of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies (SCS). The passion, dedication and commitment to their writing and to each other is a hallmark of this unique community. We applaud the individuals who incorporate this course as part of their lifelong learning journey.

The strength of the creative writing community is why SCS is honoured to recognize the 2023 Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction. From a collection of incredible submissions, the jury has selected David Chau’s “Belly of Tokyo” as the award recipient. “Blabbermouth” by Maude Abouche and Alison Stevenson’s story “The Fountain” received honourable mentions. These recognitions attest to the sustained impact that this program has in lifting the voices of writers in the region.

We are proud to play a part in developing Canadian talent and connecting writers to industry leaders like Penguin Random House Canada. Of course, the accomplishments of our learners would not happen without the talents of our celebrated and engaged instructors, to whom we are grateful for sharing their experience and insights.

Congratulations to the award winners—David, Maude, and Alison—and to all who provided submissions. You have shown true dedication to pursuing your passion, and we hope you continue to see the rewards that come with doing what you love. Thank you to our instructors; your guidance, expertise and devotion influences learners and colleagues alike. Finally, a sincere thank you to Penguin Random House Canada, whose long-standing commitment and leadership makes this award possible. I wish you all the best and commend your commitment to lifelong learning.

Yours truly,

Catherine Chandler-Crichlow, PhD

Dean, University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies





On behalf of Penguin Random House Canada, it is my honour to congratulate the recipients of the 2023 Student Award for Fiction: David Chau, who is the winner of this year's award for *Belly of Tokyo*, and finalists Maude Abouche for *Blabbermouth* and Alison Stevenson for *The Fountain*.

The stories in this year's collection, while vastly different in tone, space, and place, all remind us of the burden of identity. David's story tells the pain of coming of age in a class-led society, while Maude and Alison's stories each grapple with how one choice, to go or not to go, can alter our lives, and our identities, forever. Together these stories take us on journeys of discovery and reconciliation, confronting who we are and who we could have been.

It's a continued honour for us at Penguin Random House Canada to support the discovery and development of emerging Canadian writers, such as David, Maude, and Alison, and all this year's finalists and entrants, through the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies Creative Writing program. I know I speak on behalf of our entire company when I say that the fine work of our three honorees, and all the program's competing authors, shows just how much we all have to look forward to from the future of Canadian literature.

Supporting emerging writers, and this prize that so wonderfully celebrates them, is central to our work at Penguin Random House Canada, and we're proud to continue to sponsor this important initiative. We're especially grateful to Lee Gowan for his leadership of the Creative Writing program, to Dean of the School of Continuing Studies Catherine Chandler-Crichlow, and to all the program's instructors. Thanks as well to this year's jurors, authors Naben Ruthnum and Marianne Miller, and Penguin Canada's Meredith Pal, as well as Carla Kean and Elyse Martin for their production guidance and expertise.

Congratulations once more to the finalists. We hope you enjoy their work, and we can't wait to see what comes next for each of them.

Beth Lockley  
Vice President, Marketing  
Penguin Random House Canada



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## 2023 PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE CANADA STUDENT AWARD FINALISTS

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Instructors '22-'23

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\$2500 WINNER:

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David Chau	Belly of Tokyo	Diane Terrana Thom Vernon
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HONOURABLE MENTIONS (2 \$1000 Prizes):

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Maude Abouche	Blabbermouth	Dennis Bock Caitlin Sweet Ken Murray
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Alison Stevenson	The Fountain	Amy Jones Kevin Hardcastle Ibi Kaslik
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FINALISTS:

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Erin Ballantyne	A Specialized Chauffeur	Elizabeth Ruth David Layton
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Claire Davis	Ebb	Kevin Hardcastle
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Erin Frey	The Midwife's Apprentice	Dennis Bock
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Jianing Lu	Klein Phantasmagoria	Caitlin Sweet Willow Dawson
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Kira Lussier	The Retreat	Blair Hurley
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Nicole Mankinen	White Coat	Saeed Teebi
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Lisa Bryn Rundle	Margot and Bridget	Zalika Reid Benta
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# BELLY OF TOKYO

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DAVID CHAU



*DAVID CHAU lived in Japan for 12 years, from the frenzy of Tokyo to the solace of Nagahama, and the spaces in between. He has written many articles about life in Japan, including “Teaching the F-word” which was included in Norton’s Best of Creative Nonfiction anthology. His historical narrative non-fiction book set in the Edo Period “Out to Sea: How a Japanese Peasant Became an Englishman” is looking for an interested publisher. He is presently working on finishing “Belly of Tokyo” in Kingston.*



Dinner was curry rice that night, reconstituted from lunch the day before. Mother and I heard Dad come home from work, unexpectedly early, his Technocuisine factory cap drawn down over his face as he rushed from the front door to the bathroom. Mother tipped the glass Tupperware over. The curry, jellied up, slowly slid out, making a sucking noise, a pop, and then a final plop as it hit the bottom of the saucepan. Bits of meat, potatoes, and carrots jiggled about.

“Better than yesterday,” Mother said. “All the flavour concentrated overnight.”

She stirred the mass with a wooden spoon, jabbing and breaking apart the larger mysterious chunks. I stood at the rice cooker, scraping the dried grains off the sides. It had been left overnight—or was it two nights—and the rice had yellowed and formed white crystal webs crisscrossing the bottom of the pot. It was kind of pretty in a way.

“We still got some roast chicken in the fridge, Kensuke,” Mother said, telling me with her eyes to take it out, cut the meat from the bones, and heat it in the microwave. All with one look. I remembered the chicken from a few days ago, how the crispy skin tasted, and the meat underneath moist, as if it were sweating in the humid Tokyo summer. A gift from the superintendent, Mother said. No other explanation followed. I placed the chicken on the counter and grabbed a knife.

“Cut into the cartilage,” Mother said. “That’s where the nutrients are.”

We heard sounds of vigorous splashing coming from the bathroom, then a long pause. The only sounds were the burping of the curry heating on the stove and the cicadas crying. The bathroom door opened. A faint odor of sweet rice vinegar, lilac, and machine oil wafted into the kitchen.

Dad sat down at the dining table, his cap still on, the *T* and *C* emblazoned in metallic silver.

Mother carried the pot to the table and ladled out globs of steaming curry onto the rice. When Dad took his cap off, she gasped and almost dropped the pot in his lap.

“What the hell happened to your face?” Mother asked. One eye was almost swollen shut: a slit that revealed blackened capillaries. His jaw skewed to one side.

“Just a misunderstanding at work,” he said. “An accident.”

“It was that Mr. Yamada, wasn’t it?” she asked. “The one with the fancy Tokyo University degree and those fresh, baby eyes.”

“He never finished his degree,” Dad said.

“Look who’s talking? How’s that dream of yours? That restaurant you’re always yapping about.”

Dad picked up his spoon and dished half of his portion onto my plate.

“Not that hungry,” he said.

Placing his plate back in front of him, he started pushing the curry with the round side of the spoon, forming indents in the lump. It wasn’t often that I saw Dad eat. He left for work before sunrise and returned after dark. All the while Mother and I were asleep. He was never much of a talker, so I learned to watch him closely, his face, his movements. Unfortunately, mother didn’t notice or chose to ignore these clues. His slouching was a sign of bad posture, bad upbringing, not how work was beating him down. His hands were dried and cracked because he forgot to moisturize, not because of his twelve-hour shifts.

His job was to put food into bento boxes that zipped by on conveyor belts and were shipped to convenience stores all over Japan. The managers called him “Master Chef” because of his speed, the fastest in the company’s history. He had a sadness in his eyes whenever he brought it up. I wasn’t sure why he was given that title. He never prepared any of the food, just grabbed it from containers and arranged it neatly on the plastic trays. Mother told me the bosses were being ironic, teasing and laughing at him behind his back.

Dad dreamt of being a chef of his own restaurant when he was younger and thought that working at Technocuisine would give him a



good start. He liked the variety, he once said. Pork cutlets one day, pickled cucumbers the next, mashed potatoes the day after that.

“Why didn’t you stand up for yourself?” Mother screamed.

“Just a misunderstanding.”

“Horse-donkey shit,” Mother said, slamming the pot back on the stove. “He thinks he’s better than you. A washed-up line worker. You let him beat you. What kind of man are you? Can’t even defend yourself from Baby Eyes. Probably makes a fist with his thumb tucked inside.”

While Mother berated him, telling him what a worthless example he was setting for his son, how the Saito Family downstairs just got a new LG fridge, and how the kids next door wore Tokyo Disney shirts, Dad spooned small portions of curry into his mouth. He chewed slowly on one side, wincing from the pain and rubbing his swollen cheek.

I ate my curry and chicken cartilage, wanting to defend my dad, but one look from Mother and I dared not say a word. Children, even though I was 15, are supposed to blend into the background and become invisible. I was my father’s son.

“Kensuke, let this be a lesson for you,” Mother said. “Sometimes, you have to stand up for yourself. Look at your father! He’s hurting *and* he’s lost his self-respect.” She spotted a fly near her dish and swatted at it, but it flew off, buzzed around our heads, and settled on the ceiling.

After dinner, Mother mumbled over the sink, plates and cups, spoons clattering against each other. She gestured fiercely with a fork, jabbing it in the air to emphasize her point. Dad was still working his way through his curry rice and mumbled how there was talk of the company opening another factory in Shizuoka Prefecture. They would need a new manager. Mother blasted the soapy dishes with hot water, spraying all over the counter. Bullshit. She’s heard about that new manager position for the last five years. In all the frothy soapy bubbles and frantic scrubbing, Mother hardly gave a glance at what was left of the chicken, the breastbone sticking out like a jackknife blade, the ribs picked clean. Without the interstitial meat to hold it together, it had collapsed in a heap. Mother pushed the chicken to the far end of the kitchen counter, under the shadow of the cabinets above.

Later that night, sprawled on my bed, my legs against the wall, I threw on a pair of headphones and cranked up a YouTube video described as a *roomful of dryers in a large warehouse*. I grabbed an opened bag of ramen flavored Calbee potato chips from the floor, but it was empty. My stomach rumbled. The curry and chicken were in hand-to-hand combat.

I checked under my bed for my hidden cache of food. Strawberry Pocky sticks, Kororo Jelly capsules, and matcha-flavoured KitKats. All I saw as I hung over the side of the bed was a layer of silvery, golden wrappers. It was time to replenish. Deep pockets and distracted clerks satisfied my craving for sweet and salty foods. They wouldn't go bankrupt just because I took a couple thousand-yen worth of snacks.

A knock on the door startled me from my crime spree daydream.

"Kensuke, can I come in?" Dad asked.

"Yeah."

The door opened and there he was, smaller, framed by the door, smiling a smile that looked more like a sneer with his crooked jaw. Laughter came from the living room, Mother lost in her SMAPxSMAP variety show on television featuring grown men acting like children. He closed the door, sat down, and flashed something from behind his back.

"Remember these?"

A package of Nisshin Instant Ramen, miso flavoured.

"Crunch and munch?" I said.

When I was younger, around 8 or 9 years old, my dad and I would break out the instant ramen when we had a bad day. Mother couldn't know, of course. It was our secret. When I scraped my knees at the park or when the kids at school told me that people like us were not really humans at all—the Eta, the Untouchables—Dad would take me aside and offer me a fresh, unopened package of ramen. The character on the package was a young blond boy, red-nosed, dressed in Edo period clothing, a pair of wooden sandals on his feet, delivering a steaming bowl of ramen. I called him Nisshin Boy. I often wondered about all the places he went to, all the customers on his delivery rounds. What sort of people had food delivered right to their front door?

Nisshin Boy had not aged a day. I took the package from my dad and squeezed it between my palms until the noodles crumbled. I felt for any

remaining large pieces within and crushed them between my thumb and forefingers. With the noodles completely “crunched”, I offered the open end of the bag to my dad.

“Remember you dared me to eat the soup powder?” Dad asked.

“Double dared.”

“Almost choked to death on it.”

We passed the package back and forth, shoving handfuls of noodles in our mouths. The salt made Dad wince.

“What happened?” I asked. “At work.”

He put down the package, looked down at his hands as if summoning them to move, to tell me with a gesture what words could not express. Words never came out the way he wanted. Words to him were nothing more than steam evaporating in the air. He opened his hands, turned them over, and studied his fingers. He rubbed his palms, clearing his throat before he spoke.

“Look at my hands. I am as human as anyone else,” he said. “And my cheek. If someone hits me, I bleed.” He closed one hand into a fist and wrapped it with the fingers of his other.

“Does it hurt?” I asked, to bring us back to the present.

“Less every second. Just like with Adzuki and the bullies at school. It’ll get better.”

“Will it?”

“You know what they say, ‘Fall down seven times, get up eight.’”

“I am way past eight. Mother says I should fight back.”

“Your mother says a lot of things. You fight back, and then they’ll fight back more. No end to it,” said Dad. He handed me the ramen package, nothing but crumbs at the bottom. He put a finger to his lips and winked, “Get rid of the evidence.”

Dad got up to leave. I heard a chorus of guffawing from the TV before he shut the door. I turned the empty ramen package over and saw information about a prestigious cooking school, *The Academy*, that my dad dreamed about getting into when he was young. The ad was about a silly competition that allowed only the top three contestants to enter its hallowed kitchen classrooms and be taught by master chefs from all over Japan. Nisshin Boy was dressed as a professor with thick dark glasses,

wearing a graduating gown, and holding a pointer directed at a website address. Pretentious name for a cooking school. Full of snobby teachers and spoiled rich brats. I threw the wrapper under the bed.

Did I miss something that night? A sign that should have warned me what was to come? It was certainly out of the ordinary that he came into my room and talked with me. How could I have known that a few days later, on just a regular Thursday, my dad would go to work as usual and never come home.

After a bad day with Adzuki and his Yankee Boys elbowing me in the ribs and holding their noses every time they passed me in the hallways, I returned home from school to find two officers, one male and one female, sitting at the kitchen table asking Mother questions. Did she and her husband had a happy marriage? Any recent arguments? Any suspicious happenings prior to his disappearance? The male officer turned on his flashlight and poked its beam around our small apartment. Crumbs and dust balls cast long shadows on the floor. He aimed it at the flickering light bulb over the stove. He swung the arrow of light on the roasted chicken at the end of the kitchen counter, spotlighting darkened meat coated with a layer of shimmery slime.

Mother looked from one officer to the other, answering with quick shakes of her head and some mumbling. The whole time she crammed into her mouth rice crackers she'd laid out on the table for the officers. A cellophane wrapper twisted around her index finger cut off her circulation. The police reassured her that her husband would turn up any day now. Ninety-nine per-cent of cases ended up that way. Mother grunted, specks of cracker sticking to her lips.

That night, I searched online for any news of a body found in a river, any mysterious deaths in a public washroom, alleyway. But all the victims were identified and accounted for. Next, I looked for any reports of suicides, but such things hardly made the news anymore. Only sensational deaths attracted attention from the media. Aokigahara Forest at the base of Mt. Fuji was a popular spot for suicides—people hanging from branches of ancient trees. Others preferred quicker deaths. Jumping in front of bullet trains and bursting in a cascade of flesh and bone,

leaving only a pair of shoes. But there were no reports of any empty loafers, size 8.5. Not even on private websites that relished in the macabre. Not that I thought Dad was suicidal, but given he was a man of few words, I may have missed some clues.

I woke up early the next morning. Mother was still asleep. I heard her breathing and muttering coming from under her duvet. It was still dark outside, but the air was humid and stank of burning plastic. As I got on a rusty old bike that was unlocked (there was always one around) and pedaled off, flakes of rust peeling off behind me, I passed other apartments buildings adjacent to ours. When I was younger and the apartments still smelled of fresh paint, I often got lost along the walkways that branched off in various directions. Some ended up at a storage shed or a dumpster, others ran straight into walls without doors, and a few never ended at all, looping back to where I began. My parents, much younger then and holding hands, trailed closely behind to watch over me.

As the years passed, a pattern of green mold grew on the buildings in weblike strands that crept up to the second or third floors. The apartments were formed around a park for children to play, but the swings and slides had long been unused, brown with rust, making screeching sounds on windy nights that terrified me when I was younger. Few children lived here any more—mostly old men and women and families like ours. Our kind.

I accelerated over a pedestrian bridge that crossed a river, dodging men and women in dark business suits walking towards the station every morning to catch their train into the city for work. Dad didn't take the train. The only suit he ever wore was the one he borrowed for his parents' funerals. I got off the bike, walked it through a gap between the guard rails, and went down a makeshift trail that ran down to the river's edge. Black, white, and transparent plastic bags, empty bottles and cans, floated amongst white bubbly foam. I rode on over the stony trail, the light of the dawn hitting the surface of the river and giving off an iridescent hue from the concentric oil patches.

Soon, I reached the metal wire fence that surrounded the bento factory Technocuisine where my dad worked. Smoke billowed from its smokestacks, and there was the humming of hundreds of machines,

dynamos, and conveyor belts. Trucks with raw ingredients were backing into the loading docks.

*Pork cutlets, one day, pickled cucumbers, the next, mashed potatoes, the day after that.*

I don't know what I expected to find. The police had already retraced Dad's steps and questioned his colleagues and manager. Nothing came of their investigation. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw the bill of his company-issued cap, but it was only the outstretched wing of a dead raven caught in some brambles. A bicycle with a basket floated by. Dad had a bike with a basket to carry his lunch.

Then I saw them.

Workers of Technocuisine, dressed in coveralls, the company cap covering their eyes. They walked in a long line, single-file, on the stony trail. They were men and women, hard to differentiate in their oversized uniforms, their hair concealed under their caps. They made their way to the wire fencing. The first in line pulled back a corner of the fence to allow the others to duck under and through. A man waited for them behind the fencing in the compound, his coveralls a shade darker, two orange epaulets on his shoulder marking his senior status. He greeted each employee as they came through the gap. They replied with "Good morning, Mr. Yamada." Was this Baby Eyes? The one who beat up my father? I pushed my way forward, trying to get to the front of the line to face him, but he had already turned and was walking back to the factory. My fingers clung to the wire fencing, watching him disappear into the loading docks.

As I walked my bike home, I imagined what life must have been here hundreds of years ago, before the factory was built, before the riverbanks were cemented over, when people came to this river to fish for food that would fill their stomachs; when they grew rice in the surrounding fields irrigated by the crystal-clear waters of the river. Once.

Weeks passed and still no sign of Dad. The police called to reassure us that there was still hope, still an 80% chance he'd come home. They were working with police departments of other prefectures and widening their search. Tokyo, a monster city of 90 million people, wasn't big enough.

Did the monster city eat my father up, break him down into molecules, reabsorb him, so that now he was flowing out of the tap in our kitchen as I filled the kettle for my mother. A bitter homecoming.

The roast chicken was still there on the kitchen counter. Barely recognizable. It seemed to have resurrected, the meat heaving up and down. I saw white larvae crawling over it, pulsating on the surface, their mouths sucking up the liquified remains.

“Kensuke? Are you out there?” It was Mother in the bedroom. It was always Mother. I didn’t answer, knowing she wouldn’t hear anyways. “I need my tea. It’s 3:00, isn’t it?”

How could I forget? Each day I ran straight home from school to care for her. Since Dad’s disappearance, she didn’t go out anymore, spent every day in her bedroom, ordering me to pick up things at the nearby Circle K.

The instructions on the box of Itoen Green Tea for *Hot Brew* read: *Put a tea bag in cup, pour 250 ml of 80 degrees Celsius water, remove bag after 2 minutes, depending on individual preference. Enjoy.*

I found a cup with some stains at the bottom and wiped it clean with my shirt. Bag in cup. Check. I placed the kettle with its calcified spout on the stove, turned on the gas and ignited it with a click. Up went the flames, curling around the base of the kettle.

A loud bang from Mother’s room startled me. I ran to her. She had risen from her futon, her back pressed back against the wall, and was pointing at something. “I heard your father,” she said. “There in the corner by the trash can.”

I saw only the bedside table on which the ashtray rested, full of half smoked butts, one smoldering down to its end. Next to the table was the garbage can brimming with remains of mini sake bottles and empty bento boxes. A Nissin Styrofoam cup perched on top with words burned in red letters: *Much More Than a Soup*. The antennae of a cockroach stuck out of the cup, flicked back and forth, tasting the stale air.

As I helped my mother back to bed, the kettle screeched. “Don’t look at your mother like that! There was someone there.”

“I have to get the water,” I said. “I’ll call the super to take care of the cockroaches.”

“Don’t you dare!” Mother said. “He’s a no-good donkey-horse ass like all men. My father, then your father, and now that lying piece of shit.”

I gathered as much garbage as I could in my arms.

“You don’t believe me,” she said. “You think it’s my fault.”

I wasn’t sure what my mother was referring to: the cockroach, my missing Dad, or our entire miserable lives.

She grabbed my shirt and pulled me to the corner. Despite the stuffy room, her fingers were cold on my neck. The cockroach, sensing our approach, scurried up the wall to a crack in the ceiling.

The kettle screamed and rattled.

“Mother, your tea.”

I gently pried her hands off my shirt and settled her on the futon again. “It’s okay, Mother. I believe you. I believe you.” That seemed to calm her. She laid back and rolled to face the wall. I pulled the duvet over her pale thin legs and ran to the kitchen.

The flap at the end of the spout jiggled up and down as a plume of steam cooled and condensed on the stove fan, droplets hanging and falling. The kettle rattled and shook as red and orange flames curled around the base. I grabbed the handle and yelped in pain. *What an idiot.* I cursed the gods and dropped the kettle on the gas burner. The lid popped off and the water spilled out, turning to steam as it sizzled on the burner. The water ran along the kitchen counter. I turned off the gas and tried using a spoon to redirect the flow into the teacup. I neglected to hold the tag in one hand and, being a shallow cup, the tag sank. I grabbed at the tag with my thumb and forefinger. It burned with the heat of a thousand suns. *Stupid.* I cursed the tea, my mother, father, and the stupidity of the Itoen Tea Company for not making the strings longer. Bits of dirt and crumbs floated around on the surface of the cup, the tag still swirling around in its depths, mocking me.

“Kensuke? Isn’t it time for my tea?” Mother cried out.

The rest of the hot water rolled down to the end of counter to where the chicken laid, the heat stirring up the larvae. I got closer to see them squirming with excitement as they chewed through the layer of mucus. Then the smell hit me, acrid, vinegary.

I covered my nose with my shirt collar and ran out to the balcony.



Shutting the sliding doors behind me. Even out there in the afternoon heat and humidity, there was little relief. I breathed rapidly, trying to gulp down more air, to force it down into my lungs, but still I needed more. I grabbed the balcony railing to steady my shaking hands. The metal felt loose, and I was afraid that if I put any more weight on it, the whole balcony would plummet. I felt the ground beneath me shake and heard the loosening of the rusted brown screws and bolts that held the balcony to the building. Was it an earthquake? The Big One. Tears ran down my cheeks. I turned and looked through the balcony doors, fearful that Mother was watching me. And then I heard it.

*Much more than a soup.*

The whisper hung on a wave of fresh, cool breeze that dried the sweat from my brow and tears in my eyes. I gulped the air down as much as possible before it disappeared. After all, anything good didn't stick around for long.

Then everything was still.

I looked out at the view. The central park was empty except for a lone figure under the shade of a tree. Was that where I would end up in my old age? Sitting on park benches and feeding birds? What next: Sudoku?

Feeling better, I went back into the apartment and placed the tea next to Mother. She was still up, one part in the real world, the other lost in her own thoughts. As I quietly left her, she raised her head, "Kensuke? Can you pick up something at the Circle K?" She rummaged around for her purse and pulled out a crumpled 1000-yen bill. "We can split a shrimp bento. I'll just have the rice. You can have the meat. A growing boy needs protein."

I took the bill from her and turned to go.

"And Kensuke? A pack of cigarettes too. You know my brand."

I headed home with a bag of food from Circle K. Fully paid for. A bento box with fried shrimp, rice, pickled cabbage, and a couple of salmon rice balls. I would have to explain the energy drink to Mother. Free with any purchase of a bento? *Lame*. I crossed the pedestrian bridge where late risers with tight suits ran full sprint to catch their trains. *Shit*. I forgot Mother's cigarettes.

I felt a tug on the plastic bag and looked down. A pigeon was gazing up at the bag with hollow eyes and pecking away. I tried nudging the bird with the bag, but the pigeon pecked at every swing I took. I quickened my steps back home towards the park. The pigeon followed, keeping up the pace, its feathers bristling in annoyance. I tried kicking it away, but it dodged aside. It waddled next to me, making precision stabs at my bag until it had pierced a small hole. I'd had enough. I dropped the bag on the sidewalk and charged. Only then did it take flight in a burst of feathers.

I shouted in triumph, the echoes reverberating off the buildings. I caught my breath and turned around. *Donkey shit!* Now, there were three pigeons pecking at the bento box. Without apposable thumbs, let alone hands, they'd somehow managed to take it out of the bag. I swatted them away, but they jumped aside and resettled on the clear plastic lid, trying to pry it open.

"They've got quite the appetite, haven't they?" said someone behind me.

An old lady in a brown tracksuit stood looking at me. Her gray hair was pulled up in a bun on the back of her head. She had a canvas bag hanging off one arm. "I come here every day and even after I give them all I have, they still want more. Greedy little bastards."

I nodded. I had never heard a woman as old as a grandmother swear like that before. I made another grab at the bento box and was able to snag it this time.

"Watch out for Genji there. He'd eat anything: seeds, chips, bottle caps, even the freaking pimples off your face," she said, handing me a runaway rice ball. "I think this is yours."

"Thank you, Obasan," I said, taking it and checking my face for whiteheads.

"Please call me Mikuri," said the old woman. "I feel old if you call me Obasan." She coughed out a laugh, trying to hold it in with her hand. "There he goes again. Genji, get back here. Be a bird, not a bird brain."

The bird in question was standing between my legs, pecking at my shoelaces. He was chubbier than the others and had a round black spot on his forehead.

“Do you know why I call him Genji?” Mikuri asked. “My husband’s name was Genji. Picked at his food like a bird even when we didn’t have much.”

“I have to go home, Mrs. Mikuri,” I said. “My mom is waiting.”

“Yes, of course,” she said. “I live right over there, first floor, if you ever want to visit.” She pointed at the apartment across from my own. Funny how in all the years I lived here, I’d never noticed Mikuri. She was just one of the hundreds of old people shuffling around the web of sidewalks, living among us losers and nobodies. Everyone was just a fuzzy image, shadows cast on moldy walls.

As if she sensed what I was thinking, she said, “A lot of people come and go. Same people. I sit all day on the bench underneath that cherry tree. Come, Genji,” she said. She walked toward the bench and Genji waddled behind her. Three pigeons swooped down and paraded behind him.

“Good luck with Genji. I am Kensuke.”

“See you around, Kensuke,” she said, sitting down on the bench and opening her bag as the birds gathered around her.

I hated going to school but the alternative was worse: staying home with Mother. Besides, there was no food at home. The school offered hot lunches. Morning classes were a blur. I was thinking of my dad and my mother scolding me for everything I did or didn’t do. My showers were too long, my room a total wreck, my tea too hot or too cold.

My stomach growled. I clutched my belly and cleared my throat to mask the sound of my stomach churning in anticipation of lunch. Adzuki, my nemesis, eyed me while his followers, the Yankee Boys, mimicked him with side glances and whispers.

I heard the lunch cart squeaking down the hallway before I smelled it. The heavenly lunch ladies slid open the doors and lugged the aluminum containers by the handles onto tables at the back of the classroom. Inside, paradise resided, making worthwhile the excruciatingly slow morning: perfectly grilled fish.

Mrs. Beppu, our homeroom teacher, got up from her desk, setting in motion the transformation of our class into a lunchroom. The lines of

desks were shifted to form islands. The students in charge put on masks and tied back their hair with handkerchiefs. We all waited in line. When it was my turn, I picked up a plastic tray from the stack on one end, shuffled down the line and grabbed the food items. I was right, grilled fish. But how small it looked, the silvery crispy charred skin, the wave of dark and light meat. Then the miso soup (rather watered down today), the stir-fried spinach with sesame seeds, the carton of milk, and finally the rice. I spooned one large portion onto my plate, steam rising to my nose. I reached out for more.

“That’s enough,” said Mrs. Beppu. I didn’t notice her standing next to me with the steam in my eyes and the food clouding my mind. “We need to think of the other students.”

The whole class fell silent. Adzuki got out of line and walked to Mrs. Beppu. The Yankee Boys looked at their leader, gave each other winks and smirks, hoping to follow Adzuki’s lead but not sure what he was doing.

“Mrs. Beppu? If Kensuke wants part of my rice, I’ll be happy to give it to him. I am not that hungry.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Adzuki. But Kensuke must learn restraint and not be dictated by the whims of his appetite.”

“It’s just that Kensuke has been through a lot,” said Adzuki. “What with his father missing and his mother sick. And...”

“Yes?”

“I am not sure I should say this out loud, Mrs. Beppu.”

“It’s a learning opportunity for everyone. Say it.”

“He’s one of the others. His family are the Eta. It’s just not fair.”

“You have big heart, Adzuki. As we know, in the eyes of the law we are all equal now. Go ahead. Be an example for the rest of the class.”

“I’m fine. I don’t need any more,” I said, moving out of the line and trying to get back to my seat. Adzuki blocked my path.

“I insist,” said Adzuki, taking my bowl off my tray.

Adzuki turned to face me and stepped up so close I could see food stuck between his teeth. His back was to Mrs. Beppu, who was nodding in approval. Holding his rice bowl in one hand, he used his chopsticks in the other to push the rice into my bowl. The rice spilled over the edge.

“That’s enough,” I said.

“A little more for the road,” he said, sucking air into his nose.

And that’s when I saw what looked like a little glass marble coming out from his mouth, getting bigger and bigger. A spit ball, frothy with bubbles. It dangled off his lower lip and dropped into my bowl of rice. No one except me noticed a thing. Adzuki smiled. Mrs. Beppu clapped with the tips of her fingers and beamed with pride.

“Good for you, Adzuki,” she said. “Good. For. You.”

*Sometimes, you just got to stand up for yourself.*

Inside, something ignited. It felt like a blast of heat from an open stove, a burn that instantly enflamed my thoughts. I flailed my tray into Adzuki’s face. The fish flew arc-like in slow motion. I hammered his face, over and over. As easy as making mochi cakes from rice. Blood gushed from his nose, he fell on his knees and put up his hands to his head to block the blows. I pivoted and aimed for the sides of his head, his tender ears, using the edge of the tray.

Screams and shouts erupted around me. Mrs. Beppu. The Yankee Boys. Arms reaching out to hold my arms, a sweaty fat arm underneath my chin and around my neck pulling me away, fingers clawing at my shirt, nails clutching at my shoulders. I dropped the tray, struggled to breathe, and ran out the room head down, looking at the ground slide underneath me as if the world was rotating while I stood still.

I staggered home. When I looked up, I saw pedestrians staring with contorted faces. A little girl pointed at me and retreated behind her mother’s legs. Two businessmen stepped away and gestured to their cheeks. I wiped my cheek with my hand and saw blood on my fingers. I rushed away. The whole world could see who I truly was, an Eta, a polluted one, like my ancestors whose job was to butcher meat, prepare the dead for funerals, and execute criminals. My ancestral blood had boiled to the surface.

I crossed the pedestrian bridge. Almost home. What would I tell Mother? I fell down? That was lame. She would never believe it. I could tell her I fought back against the bullies, unlike my dad. But it didn’t feel right. I felt sick to my stomach and just wanted to throw up.

“Kensuke?” said a familiar voice. “Is that you?”

It was Mikuri, the old lady and her crazy pigeons. She had a way of popping up without me noticing. I waved to her weakly before leaning against the tree next to me and throwing up what was inside, which was not much. I hadn’t eaten all day.

I felt a warm hand gently rubbing my back. “There, there,” she said. “Let it all out.”

As if on command, my body heaved, mostly clear bile and saliva. I felt dizzy and my legs collapsed beneath me. Mikuri helped me up and led me to the bench. She sat next to me, offering some water, but even the thought of it made me sick. She didn’t ask me what happened, just sat with me, looking at the pigeons as she scattered birdseed from her bag. She offered me a handful of seeds. I threw it with more strength than I intended, pelting the pigeons so that they flew up momentarily before settling again.

“What’s wrong with that one?” I said. One pigeon was farther out from the main group, not even trying to get the food. It was too busy tugging at a plastic 6-can ring around its neck, trying to get it off.

“It’s Genji. Got in trouble again,” said Mikuri. “I tried to help, but he’s too stubborn. I swear he’s my husband, reincarnated as a pigeon. In life and death, we’re tied for all of eternity.” Genji had a hold of one end of the ring and thrashed his head back and forth to try to get it off, but the ring was so far down his neck that all it did was tightened even more.

I crouched near Genji. He was too busy going around in circles with the ring in his mouth to notice me. I put my hand out to reach for the ring, but Genji sensed my presence and pecked at my finger. *Donkey horse shit!* That hurt. I stroked its wing feathers. Genji stopped and purred like a cat. It blinked up at me with its black shallow eyes. With my other hand, I grabbed the ring and lifted it up off Genji’s head. He gave one more peck at my pinkie finger, harder this time for good measure, and strutted to his colleagues.

“You’re welcome,” I said, rubbing my finger to ease the pain.

“You did it, Kensuke,” said Mikuri, startling the pigeons around her. “You saved him. He wouldn’t let me fuss over him. Even if it would have done him good.”

“Just like your husband?”

Mikuri smiled. She put a handful of birdseed in my hand. “He must be hungry.”

I scattered them in the direction of Genji. He jerked his head in all directions, relishing his new-found freedom, his black beady eyes blinked as if he were winking at me. He started pecking at the ground, aiming for the giant sunflower seeds. Mikuri cinched her satchel and took my hand. “Come,” she said. “There’s something I want to show you. Something Genji found.”

“The pigeon?”

“My husband. He was a historian who specialized in the late Edo Period. During his research, he found a recipe from the Emperor’s own court.”

“Recipe for what?”

“Miso soup”

“Just soup?”

“Oh, Kensuke, it’s more than just a soup,” she said. “Come.” She led me by the hand, away from the pigeons still busy pecking away at the seeds, past the rusty swings and slides, and onto the labyrinthine walkway that led me right, left, and then right again.





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# BLABBERMOUTH

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MAUDE ABOUCHE



***MAUDE ABOUCHE** lives in Montreal and has a background in history, communications and journalism. She enjoys different ways of artistic expression, such as art and singing, but above all loves gripping narratives in all their forms. In her writing, she uses fantasy and science-fiction as a lens to explore history, identity, and relationships. She is currently working on her first fantasy novel set in modern-day and feudal Japan.*



Everything goes to shit with a name.

Connor kneels by the bed, his face between Gemma's legs. His tongue laps at her, working her higher and higher. His moans thrum between her thighs and send little sparks of pleasure up her spine, and she catches his blue eyes shining down the flat, smooth expanse of her stomach.

Gemma decides to give him a little porn: she arches her back and runs one hand up her chest to squeeze a nipple between two manicured fingers. The faint stirrings of pleasure coalesce into heat in the pit of her belly, and the pressure builds inside her till she throws her head back and shakes all over.

"*Noah*," she hears herself say.

A name. Just a name.

Her ex's name.

Down the curve of her waxed mons, Connor's eyes flit from confusion to hurt to anger. "The *fuck*," he says, sitting back on his heels and swiping at his mouth with one tattooed hand. "Wow, Gems. Just ... *wow*."

Catching her breath, Gemma props herself up on her elbows, thighs still quaking with the last aftershock of her orgasm. "Wait—I didn't—I didn't *say* anything."

At least she doesn't think she did.

Connor huffs. "Who the *fuck* is Noah?" He pulls himself to his feet and tugs his boxers back over his softening dick. "No, wait. Actually, I don't give a shit."

"He's—it's *no one*," she says, sitting up on the edge of the bed just in

time to catch him rolling his eyes. “I don’t know what you think I said, but I swear it doesn’t change anything between us.”

A muscle twitches under the stubble darkening his jaw. He flicks her an angry glance as he belts his jeans. “And what’s *between us*?”

Her heart thumps against her breastbone. Gemma parts her lips and widens her eyes almost imperceptibly, the way she would in the camera lens of her iPhone. “I love you.”

She’s never said it before. She’s not sure she *feels* it yet, but she will, in time—or at least she’d like to think so. Connor’s her dream boy, after all: handsome and stylish, the frontman of an up-and-coming alt-rock band. He has just the right amount of danger about him, and he chose her among all the girls sneaking backstage hoping he’d bring them home instead.

He pulls his ratty band t-shirt on and brushes his hair back with one hand. For a moment she thinks she has him, but then he shakes his head, mouth screwed into a bitter smile. “You really think I’m an idiot, huh?”

“Connor, *wait*,” she says, but he’s already stormed out of her bedroom.

Gemma lets herself fall back on her bed with a deep sigh, then stares out at the last embers of dusk vanishing behind the New York skyline. She’s sure she hasn’t said anything, but Noah’s name still haunts the room. Why him? And why now? She hasn’t spared him a single thought after signing a deal worth twenty grand with NYX, almost two years ago. Then she left dreary Winnipeg to live it up in New York City with her new friends, living off sponsorships and TikTok ad revenue.

She reaches for her phone and takes a selfie lying on the bed, dark hair spread on her silk pillowcase, cheeks still flushed with embarrassment (not that anyone can tell). Then she shares the picture with her 1,723,918 Instagram followers, with the word “after-glow” for sole caption.

♥Connor♥

Yesterday • 22:28

be over in 20  
miss u

miss u more xx

19:31

hey babe

u still coming over after ur show?

20:16

Call declined

Connor call me

????

I already said I'm sorry

Connor don't be a dick

4:37

hey so jsyk I know u and noah used to be engaged  
I thought we had smtn special but I just feel like a fkn idiot now  
so yea

10:04

wtf

unhinged tbh

11:57

why did u lie about it  
?

maybe because I knew you'd make a huge deal out of it??

I haven't even talked to him since I dumped him

it's been like 2 years

then y r u still hung up on him

12:11

sounds like ur the one hung up on him

fu gemma

Whatever. Gemma isn't going to beg, isn't going to argue or apologize for something she didn't even *do*. She slides her phone into her purse and hot-girl walks to her favourite hair salon, a trendy, exclusive establishment in Brooklyn, which has an appointment available in exchange for a TikTok feature.

Krista, the owner, combs Gemma's long brown hair with her fingers and holds the ends to the light to examine their state. "What are we getting today?"

Gemma snaps a shot of them in the mirror. Reactions are already pouring in when she answers, "Something to make my ex regret his life choices."

"Connor not in the picture anymore?" Krista asks with a sympathetic wince.

"Con-*who*?" Gemma says innocently, then shrugs. "Seriously, though. I realized I can do better than a college dropout in some small-time band."

Krista laughs. "Amen to that."

They look at Pinterest boards and swatches, till Gemma makes her choice: a buttery blonde with platinum babylights for drama and dimension. She's looking at several hours of bleach, toner, and dye, but she can edit videos in the meantime, and she's already hard at work when Krista returns with strips of foil and a bowl of lightener. The chemical smell tickles her nose and stings her eyes, but Krista works fast, expertly dividing her hair into sections to apply the cream and wrap them in foil with minimal discomfort.

She's working her way up the back of Gemma's head when a text notification from Harper, a former Winnipeg BFF, pops up on her phone screen:

**ummmm so I got a DM from THE Connor from The Loose Lips  
last night**

**he was asking about you and Noah????**

**what's THAT about**

**hope NYC is treating you well btw <3 looks like it haha**

She leaves Harper on read. Krista has stopped, and Gemma looks up to see her frowning at the back of her head in the mirror. “Everything okay?” she asks.

“Yes, yes, it’s just ... you have some sort of bruise or swelling here.” Krista makes eye contact in the mirror and smiles. “Did you bump your head or something?”

Gemma blinks. “Not that I remember.”

Krista takes a handheld mirror and angles it so Gemma can see the back of her head. Her stomach lurches at the sight, but her expression doesn’t falter. A lesion of some kind runs straight across the back of her skull, almost from ear tip to ear tip.

“Does it hurt?” Krista asks, prodding it with the back of one gloved knuckle.

“No,” she answers, puzzled.

“Should I rinse out your hair? We could do a balayage instead or—”

“No, no. Just do it, please.”

“Okay, well ... just tell me if it hurts. I’ll be careful.”

Krista retrieves some cotton pads to cover the lesion before applying the dye to the rest of her hair. Gemma takes another mirror selfie, showing off her gel nails and head full of foil, and followers instantly chime in with praise and predictions.

Despite the cotton pads, her scalp soon starts to tingle, then burns, testing her well-trained ability to grin and bear it. Every time Krista unfolds a strip of foil to inspect the strands inside, Gemma catches herself hoping it’s time to rinse off the bleach. But even when it finally is, Krista still needs to repeat the process with toner, then highlights.

By the time they’re done, hours later, Gemma’s eyes are glazed over with exhaustion and slide over the pretty pictures on her Instagram feed without seeing them. She can’t keep herself from wincing during the scalp massage—usually her favourite part—whenever Krista’s fingers wander a little too close to the strange bruise on her head. In the end, Krista cuts the massage short, then trims and styles Gemma’s hair while she distracts herself from the pain by recording the process to put together a before-and-after video.

The instant she sees the result, the throbbing in her scalp vanishes.

Her hair cascades down her shoulders in soft silvery waves; side-swept bangs brush her lashes in a coy flip, making her dark eyes pop and giving her cheeks a rosy, youthful glow.

“So?” Krista asks, making some minute adjustments with the curling iron. “What do you think?”

Gemma turns her head from side to side to watch the mirror lights turn her hair white-gold. “Totally worth the pain,” she says, smiling at her reflection.

She needs to show off, so she invites her two friends with the largest followings to join her that very night. She cranks up the drama with some contouring and Euphoria-inspired eye makeup, and opts for a simple pink slip dress to keep the focus on her new hair. Her matching Medusa Aevitas pumps announce her arrival like a drumroll, and she revels in the sight of heads turning as she makes her way across the rooftop bar overlooking Manhattan.

Jade and Alyssa gasp and squeal when they spot her. Gemma obliges when Aly twirls one finger, asking her to turn around.

“Oh. My. God. I *love* it,” Jade exclaims, stroking pale strands between two fingers. “You didn’t say you were going blonde!”

Gemma takes her seat, ensuring the MCM logo on her purse is visible to any phone cameras that may point her way. “It was a bit of an impulse,” she answers with a demure shrug. “New me.”

The three of them huddle together for a selfie. The neon lights cast a colourful glow on Gemma’s hair and catch the pearly shimmer of her makeup. A server brings them a round of shots, “courtesy of the gentlemen by the bar”, where a few slickly dressed guys are grinning at them. “You know what to do,” one of them shouts. “Cheers!”

The Grey Goose pools in her stomach and sends warmth rippling through her. Her bare shoulders move of their own volition to the electronic drumbeats while they catch up: Aly tells them about her recent vintage finds, and Jade shows off her latest makeup looks.

The server returns with their drinks—on the house—and a dozen oysters on crushed ice. Jade pounces. They take a sip of each other’s drinks and more selfies.



Then Aly licks her lips, which means she's trying to look nonchalant. "So," she starts. "How's Connor?"

Gemma takes a long sip of raspberry mojito to give herself some composure, but the minty tartness turns bitter on her tongue. "Actually, I dumped him last night," she says with a shrug.

The other two girls gasp behind gel fingernails. "What? *Why?*" Aly asks.

"He's just *sooo* jealous. Like, totally threatened by the fact that I have a past."

Jade laughs and shakes her head, squeezing some lemon juice on her fifth oyster. "Like *he* doesn't."

"Right? Apparently he stalked my ex online. Total hypocrite."

"Um, *creepy*," Jade singsongs. "Always got weird vibes from him. Feeling so vindicated in this Chili's tonight."

"Ugh, forget him," says Aly with a dismissive wave. "You can do so much better, Gems."

Gemma opens her mouth to thank her, but instead she hears herself say, "Yeah, right. Like you haven't been into him since I've known you."

Aly and Jade stare at her, glossy lips parted in shock. Her voice hangs between them like a tangible thing, more shocking than if she'd spat into the plate of oysters.

"Aly, I'm sorry—" Gemma tries, but her own voice cuts her off: "Do you think I'm blind or just stupid?" She slaps her hands over her mouth, but the words aren't muffled in the least, and keep tumbling out of her like someone else was speaking them. "I've seen you make eyes at him whenever you thought I wasn't looking. Well, feel free to help yourself to my hand-me-downs. He's *all* yours."

Aly blanches. Jade rises to her feet. "Gems, what is *wrong* with you?"

"Oh, and don't *you* start, Jade," her voice continues, even though her mouth is still sealed shut against her palms. It rings in her ears like someone was standing right behind her, but there's no one there when she casts a quick glance over her shoulder. "I know what you've been saying behind my back: that I'm a hack, that no one should make this much money posting selfies and unboxing shit on Insta, but I don't see *you* complaining when you're getting free shit, huh? You're welcome, by the way."

The other two sit speechless. The upbeat music is so incongruous it sounds mocking, and Gemma bites back a hysterical laugh before peeling her hands off her mouth.

“I am so sorry,” she blurts. “I don’t know what—”

Aly grips the stem of her glass, and her Blue Lady splashes into Gemma’s face.

It takes two bouncers to separate them and shove them into different cabs. Gemma slams the door of her apartment closed, kicks her high heels off, and throws her purse in a corner of the living room. She muffles her frustrated scream with one of the accent pillows on her couch, remembering too late how expensive those damn things were. The hand-embroidered cover is smeared with lipstick, and she throws the pillow across the room with a shout, revelling in the noisy crash of a vase on the floor.

She stumbles into the bathroom to assess the damage. One spaghetti strap hangs off her shoulder; mascara runs down her face in black tracks, and her hair and the satin of her dress are stained with the blue Curaçao of Aly’s drink. Even her bra is wet with the crushed ice that melted in her cleavage. She peels her clothes off and drops to her knees next to the bathtub to fiddle with the taps and wash her hair, scrubbing hard at her scalp.

The pain is so sudden she drops the showerhead, which clangs against the porcelain and sprays the walls haphazardly. Gemma struggles to turn off the faucet through the tears that spring to her eyes. She takes a few deep breaths till the pain ebbs away, and a few more to muster the courage to feel the back of her head with tentative fingertips.

The skin there is raised and fleshy, like a badly healed scar.

She stands, ignoring the water dripping down her body. She angles the swivelled arm of her wall-mounted mirror till the back of her head appears in the mirrored doors of the cabinet. Then she lifts sections of wet hair with trembling hands. The lesion looks even bigger now than it did at the hair salon: the swelling protrudes from the surrounding hair, and a crease runs down the middle like it was about to split open.

Gemma gags. Two lumps of pink flesh, like—like—

Like *lips*.

“Hi, Gems,” the mouth on the back of her head says, baring its teeth in a grotesque smile.

She lifts the toilet lid just in time to throw up. Crushed mint leaves and half-chewed oysters float around the bowl, but she’ll take *that* over the horrible thing in the mirror. She stays curled up on the cold tiles for several minutes before pulling herself up on shaking legs and risking another look at her skull.

Definitely a mouth. A monstrous mouth, with a set of fleshy lips ringing too many mismatched teeth, like someone lost them all and then rearranged them at random in the gums. A large, pink tongue darts out to lick her fingertips when she ventures another touch, and she gags again, her empty stomach clenching.

No. *No*. She drank too much, or maybe someone spiked her drink and she’s hallucinating, or maybe she did hit her head and is now lying in a hospital bed somewhere.

But it looks—and *feels*—far too real to be a figment of her imagination.

“What the *fuck*,” Gemma says, twisting the hot water on to wash the sensation off her fingers. The water turns scalding, but she barely notices. “What the fuck is this thing?”

“Thing’? Bestie, that stings. And here I thought you’d be grateful.”

She stares at her reflection till it clicks. “It’s ... it’s *you*. You’re the one who said all those awful things to Aly and Jade.”

“Hey, I just tell it like it is. Fuck ’em, I say.”

“*And Connor.*”

It chuckles. “Well, no great loss there. You could barely stand him.” It yawns. “Say, do you have chips or something? I got the munchies.”

Gemma screams.

The doctor leans back in his chair and folds his hands over his stomach. “So, Miss Wilson. What can I do for you?”

*Can you get rid of the talking mouth at the back of my head?* she wants to say, but the words catch in her throat. “I think ... I think I’d better show you.”

One of his eyebrows twitches at that, but he ushers her towards the exam table. The paper crackles under her weight, uncomfortably loud in the tiny, sterile room. He turns on the overhead lamp and adjusts the chrome dome while she pulls her hat off.

The doctor jerks back, making a strangled noise he tries to disguise as a cough while the beam skips around the wall in front of her. He takes a sharp breath before moving the lamp again, then nudges her head down with one hand, to the side, then back. “Does it ...” He clears his throat. “Does it hurt?”

Gemma stares at a bland watercolour painting. “No, not really.”

He pulls on a latex glove, then parts the lips with one finger. At least the mouth is behaving itself: no tongue wagging, literal or otherwise.

“Have you ever seen anything like it before?” she asks in a small voice, just to break the silence.

He makes a pensive noise. “Not personally, but I have read about similar cases. There’s a kind of tumour called teratoma that contains tissue like teeth, hair, or even eyes. Granted they’re usually diagnosed within the first two years of life, and I’ve not heard of one developing on the skull, but I believe that’s what we’re looking at.”

Gemma stopped listening after *tumour*. “So, it’s cancer.”

“No, no, not necessarily,” he says, in a tone probably meant to be reassuring. “It’s likely benign. A biopsy will tell us for sure.” He pauses to lower the mouth’s bottom lip and examine the teeth. “It may also be another type of teratoma called ‘fetus in fetu’. In this case, we would be looking at tissue from another fetus that was absorbed in the womb by its twin—that is to say, *you*.”

Tumour or cannibalized twin. She can’t decide which is worse. “So I had a twin and never knew it? And I, what, *ate* them?”

“That’s only a hypothesis. The other fetus would not have been viable. A most fascinating specimen,” he adds under his breath, like he’s forgotten she’s there.

“Can you take it out?”

The doctor walks to the nearby countertop. “I’d like to perform a biopsy first to rule out cancer, and then schedule a CT scan to have a better look at this ... *artefact*. Then we can assess the best course of action.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

He prepares a syringe of anesthetic, disinfects her head with a sterile wipe, then presses two fingers on the mouth. “You’ll feel a prick ...”

*Take that, you stupid mouth*, Gemma thinks, just before the needle pierces the skin. A burn spreads around the injection site; she closes her eyes and grips the front of her jeans till the pain fades.

“Do you feel this?” the doctor asks, presumably prodding the mouth on her head.

“No.”

“Excellent.” He retrieves a dermal punch and a small plastic container. “Now I’ll remove a tissue sample to send to the lab, then stitch the incision site. It’ll only take a couple of minutes. And your hair will hide everything,” he finishes cheerfully.

“Okay,” Gemma squeaks in response, eyes still shut hard.

The doctor gets to work, her hair shifting under his hands and her scalp rippling at his touch. Then he makes a low, curious noise. “What—”

A crunch, like someone biting off a carrot. The doctor screams. Something tugs her head back hard, almost dragging her off the exam table. Items clatter to the floor, and his screams ring in her ears while he tries to jerk his hand free. Gemma pulls in the opposite direction, her scalp burning around the blank spot left by the anesthetic.

Her head snaps forward. Hot liquid spatters the back of her neck, and she whirls around to see blood spurting from the doctor’s mangled hand, spraying her face and the front of her t-shirt, staining his white coat, the white walls, and the white paper on the table. He stumbles back, eyes wild, then falls against the wall and slides to the floor, moaning.

The mouth at the back of Gemma’s head spits loudly. Two fingers drop to the floor tiles.

“Doctor?”

A pair of nurses appear in the doorway. They gasp at the carnage, but immediately spring into action. One turns her lanyard into a tourniquet while the other rounds on Gemma.

“What happened here?”

“I ... I—I don’t ...”

She whirls around and takes off running, the mouth cackling in her wake. Patients gawk at her from above their glossy magazine pages while she flies across the waiting room and makes for the staircase.

“Hey! Come back!” the nurse yells from the doorway, but Gemma takes the stairs two by two, tripping down the last few steps. By the time she reaches the street, she seems to have lost her.

The Uber ride home is a blur. She keeps her arms crossed over the bloodstain on her t-shirt while the driver casts nervous glances at her in his rear-view mirror. The whooping noise of a siren almost sends her hyperventilating, but the police car simply drives past them, and she makes it home without incident. She stumbles out of the car without thanking the driver and runs up the steps to her apartment, head tucked into her collar so no one can see her.

She gasps at her reflection in the full-length mirror of the entrance hall. Streaks of dried blood cake her hair and clothes, and the bluish half-moons under her wild eyes match the Curaçao stains on her hair.

“What did you *do*?” she shouts at her own reflection.

“You were going to let him cut me up!” the mouth answers, except the anesthetic hasn’t worn off yet, and the result is an almost comical mumble that sounds like *oo uh gonna let im cuh mih uh*.

Gemma throws her wardrobe door open and starts rummaging through it. She tosses clothes and empty shoeboxes over her shoulder till she finds what she’s looking for, tucked away beneath laundry and sample packages she never bothered to open.

Her sewing box.

A sweep of her arm clears the bathroom counter. She angles her mirrors to see the reflection of the back of her head. The doctor’s blood is everywhere, staining the mouth’s lips and teeth like dark lipstick, matting her hair, and splattering her collar in dried flakes.

She fumbles with needles and bobbins, ignoring the mouth. “Wow, overreacting, much?” it says. “Be for real, Gems.”

“*Shut up.*”

She clips her bloodstained hair out of the way. Douses a needle in rubbing alcohol. Threads a double length of yarn with shaking hands. Takes a deep breath, pinches one corner of the mouth closed with two

fingers, and thrusts the needle through the skin of her scalp.

Pain bursts across her eyes in white stars. Her knees buckle, but she pinches the lips harder and forces the needle through, tears running down her face. The length of thread follows, till the knot catches on skin.

Gemma sobs. One stitch done.

Blood drips down the nape of her neck with each new stitch, and hot, coppery wafts fill the bathroom. Soon her hands are slick with it, and she struggles to keep the mouth shut while it howls and nips at her fingers. The tears blurring her vision make the mirrors useless, so she soon moves by feel and touch alone, tightening the stitches despite the pain. By the time she reaches the numbed area on her head, the mouth's outraged shouts are reduced to muffled moans, but the lack of sensation only makes it harder to guide the needle, and more than once she feels the scrape of metal on bone.

When she's done, the mouth looks like a fat, angry caterpillar. Gemma cuts the length of thread and ties it into a tight double knot—no, make it triple. Then she sits down hard on her cold bathroom floor and rests her forehead on her knees. Her fingers are shaking and hurt from maneuvering the needle; her scalp throbs, and a splitting headache forks behind her eyeballs.

Tears scald her eyelids and sobs shake her shoulders until she slips into a restless doze. When her phone trills, hours later, she wakes up dazed on the bloodstained tiles, her cheek resting on the lip of the tub. The anesthetic has worn off, and the stitches throb with each heartbeat.

She unlocks her screen to new notifications:

**20% off your basket and 30% off all skincare items ...**

**I can take it but Aly did NOT deserve what you ...**

**See you TONIGHT at the High Line for Victoria's ...**

*Shit.* The Victoria's Secret fragrance launch.

Gemma pulls herself up and waits for her head to stop spinning before turning on the shower. She can still make it if she hurries.

Less than two hours later, she's on her way to the High Line. The mouth has been quiet since she sewed it shut, and she's found no mention of a "Doctor Attacked by Two-Mouthed Patient" while scouring Twitter. Not that she thought he'd press charges. No one would believe his story. Besides, she wasn't really responsible anyway.

*Me and my big mouth*, she thinks, and catches herself grinning.

The Hudson glitters under the sun, and the hum of New York City is muffled and distant. A flower arch illuminated by white neon lights welcomes visitors to the event. She steps into a frilly sea of summer dresses and perfectly styled hair; the air is filled with high-pitched chatter, the fragrance of peony blooms, and the music spilling from the speakers of a DJ booth.

Gemma heads for the cocktail bar, looking for a drink to smooth her frayed nerves and dull the pain. It's a long way there, though, and she has to stop to kiss cheeks dusted in bronzer, pose for group selfies, and compliment other attendees, hoping no one notices the edge to her smile. People exclaim at her hair and ask how she's been (*Oh, you know, just had to sew shut the mouth that grew at the back of my head*). More than a few inquire about Connor, who's been spotted last night making out with some brunette. They brandish their scythe-sharp smiles, eyes hungry behind fake lashes; she shrugs and smiles back till her cheeks and the corners of her lips are sore.

That extra mouth *would* be useful right about now.

The noise and perfume soon turn the throb to a high, keening agony, but Gemma fishes her cellphone out of her purse to distract herself. In just a few taps, she has a surprise event streaming on TikTok: *Hang out with me at the Victoria's Secret fragrance launch!* Even with no advance notice, hundreds of viewers pour in immediately, bringing tips and gifts. A fraction of her usual attendance, but with more than two million followers, still a sizable audience.

The girl smiling back at her from the handheld screen is gorgeous: her face is framed in ethereal waves, her long lashes bat enticingly, and her glossy lips shimmer under the pink lights. The light blue streaks of faded Curaçao are an unexpected hit; she thanks her followers profusely



and even greets a few by name to their collective delight. She sweeps her phone camera around the event space, showing off the display of glass perfume bottles, the arrangements of peonies and roses, the girls in their patent heels and coquettish dresses. She mingles with her fellow influencers like a bee buzzing from flower to flower, describing to her viewers the notes of the new fragrance and the taste of her grapefruit cocktail (sweet and just tart enough not to be cloying, with a nice vodka kick).

What does it matter that she's in pain? That she's lonely and miserable? No one can tell through the screen.

They'd all kill to be her.

The unending scroll of comments on the livestream chat is more addictive than a gacha game's spinning wheel, and not even the haters clamouring for her to unalive herself can burst her bubble. Her head hurts more and more as the evening progresses, but the tearing pain is easy enough to ignore while she basks in the attention, sparkling in the flashes of phone cameras and floating on a cloud of pink floral scent when—

“Is that—is that *blood*?”

People around her swivel in her direction, gasping. Gemma stares at herself on her cellphone screen while blood snakes down her neck to stain the collar of her dress. She tries to press one hand to the back of her head, but too late: the stitches pop loose one by one, and blood-slick lips move against her palm as the mouth yawns open.

“You people are *tweaking*,” it shouts.

The din of conversation dies, and the flood of praise and heart-eyed emoji on her screen comes to a halt. Gemma fumbles to stop the livestream, but her hands are slippery with blood, and the wet screen has stopped responding.

“What if I told you everyone here is just as miserable as you?” the mouth continues. “I know you envy them. I know you look up to them. I know you want to be just like them, but trust me, there's no satiating that hunger. All the quilted Chanel bags and retinol serums in the world will never fill the gaping void inside you.”

The phone slips out of Gemma's clammy, bloody palms, clattering to the floor and disappearing between stilettos and toe cleavage. She

scrabbles to find it, all too aware of the other phones aimed at her.

When at last she picks it back up, the chat is already out of control, unspooling with panicked reactions and the occasional skeptic invoking a publicity stunt. She kills the livestream, then elbows her way out of the crowd and runs as fast as her high heels allow, while tears blur the New York City streets.

By the time she makes it home, her name is already trending on Twitter. One screen capture is well on its way to going viral, showing the flash of bared teeth on her head like a monstrous mirror of her own gaping mouth:

**WHAT IS THAT**

**omg thats gemma wilson what the hell**

**who**

**one of those so-called influencers ugh**

**EWWW WHAT THE FUCK DID I JUST WATCH**

**wtfffff**

**come on ppl this looks shopped af I can tell from the pixels**

**Hi I'm Daveed Howard and I'm looking for a sugar baby, DM if interested ...**

**HAHA can't believe this bitch is showing her face in public after what she did**

**Yep karma sure works fast, damn**

**wait what did she do??**

**I'll dm you**

Gemma throws her phone as hard as she can. It strikes the wall with a satisfying noise, then falls to the floor, cracks spiderwebbing the screen. But it's not enough. She wants to hurt that damn mouth, so she pulls at her hair and slams her fists down on her skull. The pain is satisfying: the more she hurts, the more the mouth must hurt, too. Adrenaline pumps through her veins, blunting the edge of the pain, so she bangs the back of her head against the wall harder and harder, till dizzy stars burst in front of her eyes.

"Gems, stop," the mouth says, and she's gratified to hear it struggle through swollen lips and broken teeth. "You're *so* unserious right now."

“Like hell I’m letting you ruin my life.”

It laughs, an ugly, contemptuous noise. “Oh, honey. You did that yourself.”

*Enough.* Gemma stumbles into the bathroom and tugs drawers open, rummaging through skincare and beauty containers till her hand closes on a full-size bottle of nail polish remover. The mouth stays resolutely shut, but a pair of tweezers takes care of that. Bending over the sink, Gemma sticks the uncapped bottle upside down between the bruised lips. The raw stitches scream in protest; the liquid dribbles down her face and spills into her mouth, and she chokes at the chemical taste while the fumes burn her eyes.

The bottle slips out of her wet hand. She waits for it to clatter to the floor and pour its contents everywhere, but no.

Instead, it just—*vanishes*.

Gemma looks around the bathroom counter and floor, but she knows she won’t find it there. The bottle fell whole into the mouth and disappeared, like she dropped it into a deep, black well.

“What the ... what the *fuck*.”

She feels the back of her head with trembling fingers. Her hair is wet with blood and nail polish remover; she pushes two fingers past swollen lips and sharp broken teeth, her heart pounding against her ribcage. She feels around inside the mouth, but finds nothing except cavernous heat where her skull—her *brain*—should be. No resistance, no bone, no nothing, so she pushes deeper and deeper, sliding in one knuckle, two, three, wriggling her fingers in hopes of touching something, anything, but there’s nothing.

Nothing at all.

Tears mingle with the nail polish remover drying on her face. Her whole hand now fits inside the mouth. “What the fuck *are* you?” she screams, wrist-deep inside her own head.

She almost expects to see her hand come out of her own mouth, but it too vanishes into her head. Her arm slides in to the elbow, then slips inside, too. The mouth works like a fish struggling to breathe, swallowing her arms, her shoulder blades, her torso. The rest of her follows, like some hideous reverse birth, and then she’s inside—inside out, really—

floating in her own hollowness.

“What ... what is this place?”

Her voice is quiet, like it has nothing to bounce off. She turns her head—or thinks she does, anyway; does she even have a body anymore?—but there’s only blackness stretching as far as she can see. Phantom lights flash at the edge of her vision, but she can’t move fast enough to catch them.

“It’s you,” her own voice replies. “*I’m* you. That’s why you can’t get rid of me.”

Gemma whips her head around to find the source of the voice, but it springs from everywhere at once. The very darkness shivers with it. “You’re lying. Get out. Get out of my *head*.”

A laugh. “If anyone’s lying, it’s you. You’ve been lying to yourself for so long you can’t even tell the difference anymore.”

One of the lights resolves into a thin line as the mouth speaks, and Gemma knows exactly where she is: her childhood room, with watery moonlight seeping through closed curtains. A few steps and she’ll find her bed, tucked under the sloping eaves. Bedsheets and a few strips of duct tape would turn it into a magic fort where she’d swap secrets with her friends, growing up. String lights cast an amber hue through the darkness, blinking in and out of view like dust motes in sunlight.

“I wanted more, so I went and got it,” Gemma says, and there’s a pleading, pathetic edge to her voice. “Why is that so bad? People change all the time. It’s called *growth*.”

“That wasn’t you,” a different voice says, and Gemma’s heart plummets.

*Noah*, the first word the mouth said, that night with Connor. The name that started it all.

“I had no idea who you were anymore,” Noah continues, and she thinks she can make out the line of one broad shoulder in the dark. “You broke my heart, you know that?”

The glow of the string lights catches the facets of the diamond ring she gave him back, a lifetime ago. She reaches for him, but her hand moves through shadow. “I know,” she says. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” Gemma follows Noah’s voice. The lights swirl together

again and scatter when she gets close, like giggling girls up to no good. “All of a sudden I wasn’t good enough for you. And I get it. Now you have it all. I just ... I thought we were happy, Gems.”

This time, Gemma catches one of the floating orbs of light. A memory: a summer during high school, bonfires and mosquito bites on brown legs. She misses it now; misses sitting in the passenger seat of Harper’s beat-up Mazda, singing out of tune while the wind lashed at her hair; misses being a freckled kid with braces and skinned knees and not a care in the world.

When did she stop being that kid?

“Maybe *you* were happy,” Gemma says, “but I hated who I was. I wanted to get rid of her. Become someone else.”

And so she did. She cut off parts of herself till she fit in the tiny black square of her phone’s screen. They’re all here now, though, like beloved toys in a dusty attic.

Her own voice breaks the silence again. “Sorry to break it to you,” the mouth says, “but that girl’s still here. She never left.”

Gemma curls up on herself and closes her eyes. She likes it here. The darkness is comfortable: it smells like the laundry detergent her mother used, like the hoodies she’d borrow from Noah, like old leather car seats and rain on concrete. Like clean sweat and strawberry vape juice and *freedom*.

“What do you want?” she asks.

“I think you know that already.”

In the bathroom mirror, her mouth smiles.



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# THE FOUNTAIN

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ALISON STEVENSON



**ALISON STEVENSON** lives in Toronto. Her stories have appeared in *Prairie Fire*, *The New Quarterly*, *PRISM international*, *Pulp Literature*, and elsewhere, have been finalists in the Alice Munro Festival Contest and PRH Student Fiction Award (2022) and longlisted for the CBC and TNQ/ Peter Hinchcliffe prizes. She recently completed the U of T School of Continuing Studies Certificate in Creative Writing with the mentorship of Amy Jones, and is working on a short story collection. Find her at [alisonstevensonwriter.com](http://alisonstevensonwriter.com)





The boy's head, held immobile in a Mayfield skull clamp, was angled to the side, a thin plastic tarp attached, forming a barrier. On one side was the portion of the boy from the eyebrows up and on the other, tented and draped, the remainder of him. Hissing noises, beeps, and bright light bounced off white tile walls. Mozart's Jupiter Symphony played softly in the background.

Dr. William Barber wore magnifying loupes on his glasses and a bright lamp on his forehead. There are many occupations of which one might say, 'It's not brain surgery.' Bill's was not one of them. Head of Neurology at a world-class teaching hospital in Toronto, he was not only a surgeon, he was also involved in research and training. Beside him was Richard Shuter, Neurosurgery Resident. Close to hand, trays held tools, sponges, implements. Monitor screens on the wall displayed cross-section images of the boy's head. A steel bowl nearby contained a curved piece of bone. Between the men a cluster of clamps, tubes and wires radiated octopus-like from the craniotomy site, at the center of which was the boy's brain.

"Okay Matt," called Bill, "let's wake him up."

They'd spent the last two hours incising, folding back and clamping off a flap of scalp, drilling burr holes and sawing through bone, cutting through the protective dura and other membrane layers to reach the left temporal lobe, where the tumour was. Now they needed the teenaged boy's help to go any further with the procedure.

The anaesthesiologist adjusted the boy's sedation. It would take about fifteen minutes for him to reach the necessary level of groggy consciousness for them to continue. During the wait, Matt and Rick Shuter discussed their continuing disbelief that neither Italy nor the Netherlands had made the World Cup round of sixteen.

When it was time, Matt addressed the boy in a loud voice. “Hassan, can you hear me? It’s Matt.” Seated on a low rolling stool, he shone a flashlight in the boy’s face. The boy’s eyebrows contracted to a frown and he mumbled something.

“Sorry, Hassan,” said Matt, “you can’t sleep right now. We need you, remember?”

Hassan’s eyes opened. His gaze met Matt’s, inches away. The words were half-sedated, drunk-slow. “I’m right here, Matt. You don’t need to yell.”

The tumour was near the speech center of Hassan’s brain, near the part called Wernicke’s area. Any damage there could permanently impair his ability to speak. Hassan would help guide them by responding to questions and identifying images while the surgery was in progress. There are no nerve endings in the brain; he would feel no pain.

Using a probe with a mild electric current, Bill would stimulate parts of Hassan’s brain near the tumour. If Hassan couldn’t speak in answer to a simple question, if he even paused in his response, they’d know the probe was touching a speech area. In this way they could map his brain, identifying the exact contours of the no-go places and thereby remove as much of the tumour as possible while sparing the important functional areas. Bill would feel his way around the surface of Hassan’s brain, the probe like a red-tipped cane tap-tapping along the ground to find a safe path.

Almost three hours into the procedure. Hassan was gamely identifying pens, cows and other objects in the pictures Matt held in front of his face, just as they’d practised in the days before surgery. The tarp shrouded them. From outside, bright light filtering through the plastic turned the figures inside into blurred silhouettes.

Bill nudged aside part of Hassan’s brain with the instrument in his left hand while incising tissue with the ultrasonic aspirator held in his right. Rick followed each movement, cauterizing then irrigating with a syringe and suctioning excess fluid. Bill moved the probe further along the tumour’s edge. Matt asked his question. There was a tell-tale pause in the middle of Hassan’s response. Matt repeated, “What’s this Hassan?”

“C-c-car,” Hassan stuttered.

So that was the border. Bill glanced at Rick and pointed with his tool. “Okay, Hassan,” he called through the tarp, “next one.”

“Airplane,” said Hassan without hesitation. Bill nodded and took a moment to stretch his neck before proceeding.

Later, Hassan’s voice through the plastic: “Doctor Barbie, something’s on my mind.”

“What’s that, Hassan?”

“Your thumb.” Hassan’s sluggish, dopey laughter was infectious.

Bill was pleased with how the procedure was going; the tumour was nearly free. He’d gently separated most of its edges from the surrounding tissue, untangled and detached it from the nest of blood vessels. Matt and Hassan and the OR nurse bantered quietly amongst themselves.

Then another stutter in Hassan’s voice. But this time it was not just Hassan’s voice that had paused. Bill had been in the middle of a delicate pass with the aspirator, cutting at the perimeter of the tumour, when suddenly his hand stopped moving. His brain was telling his hand to move, but it wasn’t obeying; it had stopped taking orders and gone rogue. To anyone else it would have seemed a tiny tremor, a fraction of a second’s hesitation in the smooth advance of the incision. But Bill dealt in micrometers. It was as if a violinist performing a concerto had held a note for a few jarring added beats while the orchestra played on. An extra moment with the aspirator was extra, unnecessary damage.

Rick had been watching Bill’s every move. He looked up quickly.

“All good?”

Bill took a breath. His hand gave a tiny lurch and started moving again. He continued with the incision.

“Good,” he said, exhaling.

The tumour was out. It was the size of a strawberry, the consistency of gelatine. Everything looked clean—a good chance they’d got all of it. Anything left would be chased down later with radiation and chemotherapy to try to prevent regrowth.

“Okay Hassan, looks like your work here is done,” said Matt. “You’ve earned yourself some sleep.”

“Thanks Doc, see you later.”

Bill handed over to Rick to suture the dura, replace the skull flap

and secure it in place with titanium plates and screws. Rick was finishing sewing and stapling the boy's scalp back overtop as Bill left the OR. It had been more than four hours since they'd started.

He was exhausted. His back was clenched and throbbing. He quickly washed his hands and arms, put a clean white jacket over his soiled scrubs and headed to the surgical waiting room. It had soothing colours and comfortable sofas but, for the people waiting there, it must surely be a kind of hell; Bill would not leave Hassan's parents there longer than necessary. They'd been in limbo ever since learning their eighteen-year-old son had suffered a seizure at a late-night pick-up hockey game and was in an ambulance on the way to hospital.

The doctor's appointments, the MRI, the discovery of a mass on his brain—they'd fallen into an in-between place, wrenched from their normal lives and abruptly reassigned from the category of regular people into the category of people who are part of 'courageous battles.' Dealing with the human impact was the most difficult part of Bill's job. At least today he was carrying a positive message.

They were huddled together on a sofa in the far corner. The father, a slight man wearing a tired suit, sat staring straight ahead. The mother was asleep, head tilted at an awkward angle, shoulders crumpled forward. When Bill had met with them in his office, Hassan translated for them. Their eyes were fixed on Bill the entire time. Hassan, lanky, with a mop of dark hair, had reached to touch them reassuringly.

As Bill crossed the waiting room, the father saw him and sprang up. The mother was jostled awake by the movement. She looked around and a spasm crossed her face. She slowly stood. Watching Bill approach, the father's expression was blank, except for his wide-open eyes. The mother's face was contorted, as if she were readying herself for a blow.

He took a deep breath and composed his face into a benign, authoritative expression—reassuring yet remote. They didn't need to think of him as a nice man, or a friend. It wasn't that he was arrogant or wanted to be a god to them. But, in the face of this terror, he knew they needed to believe he was something more than an ordinary man. He ignored the pain in his back. As he came near, he met their eyes and nodded, then spoke. At five o'clock Bill was in his office dictating notes his assistant would

transcribe in the morning. “An abnormal mass of twelve grams was excised and sent to pathology for testing...”

A knock—his assistant put her head round the door. “You asked me to remind you about dinner. I’m heading out now.” He was still dictating when the cab company phoned.

He was meeting Michael for dinner. He would have preferred to be home with Lesley and Irene, but it wasn’t often Michael came to Toronto. They’d lived in the same house at Queen’s when Bill was in undergrad. Michael had been charismatic, and a prodigious player. In contrast, Bill was studious, not flamboyant, and had a steady girlfriend, Katherine, right until the end of third year.

Michael had done well for himself: a tenured professorship at Queen’s and a long list of publications within his field of anthropology.

“So, what brings you to Toronto,” Bill asked once they’d ordered, “one of your academic boondoggles?”

“Ha! Toronto’s not exactly a boondoggle. This year the international IASF conference happens to be here instead of somewhere interesting.”

“How’s Natalie? Did she come?” Michael’s wife had been part of their university circle.

“I never bring Nat to these things, no matter where they are. She’d just be on her own all day. And besides, opportunities present themselves that I couldn’t pursue if Nat were here, if you know what I mean.”

When Bill said nothing, Michael continued. “It’s liberating, being away from your day-to-day world, exchanging ideas with people who really understand your work, rubbing shoulders... Let’s just say there are some very dynamic women in my field.”

Michael looked self-satisfied.

“I’m not sure what you’re saying, Michael, but you know how fond I am of Natalie.” She had been kind and sympathetic to Bill when Katherine broke up with him. He didn’t like to think of her being hurt or betrayed. When had Michael become such a smug jerk?

“Aren’t you the prude, Bill?! Forget I said anything. It’s only harmless fun. What Natalie doesn’t know can’t hurt her.”

Michael was almost finished his steak when he paused, knife poised above the plate. “I almost forgot, Nat asked me to pass on

something. Katherine Warringer, that girlfriend of yours from undergrad, the one who went to Europe and never came back—one of Natalie's friends knew her sister and kept in touch. Apparently, Katherine died about six months ago. Natalie just heard recently. Some kind of cancer—pancreatic—no, wait, sorry I can't remember. But the whole episode was a long time ago, wasn't it. A shame of course, but these things happen. Now, coffee?"

There was a shiny streak of grease at the side of Michael's mouth. In retrospect, maybe he'd always been a jerk. It would have been better if Natalie had just phoned to tell the news about Katherine.

Bill left home early so he could look in on Hassan before his meeting with Dr. Singh. Hassan was sleeping, only his gauze-wrapped head and thin neck showing above the covers. He looked like a baby. There was no information on the chart about his night, but he seemed comfortable.

The meeting with Dr. Singh was in a different building. Bill arrived early. He could have badged himself in to the room, but Dr. Singh would be disappointed if he went in without her. This was an auspicious time; her project had reached an important milestone.

Nargis Singh was an engineer as well as a medical doctor. She had oversight of the entire project, from initial proposal to research, equipment design, testing and implementation. She'd worked with the medical experts, the software, artificial intelligence and machine learning people, the physicists, the robotics people, the imaging people. She'd be showing him the functional prototype of the device they'd worked on for so long. He'd be one of the first to see it, in honour of his contributions to the project and the friendship that had developed between them.

It was eight years since she'd first approached him. He was primarily a surgeon and a teacher, but his interest in neurological conditions, especially Parkinson's disease, was widely known. She asked for his insights and help; she was having trouble getting buy-in from other stakeholders. Bill was impressed by her credentials and her drive. And he liked her humour. He used his standing to secure a coveted MRI machine for the project.

The Reneoscitor—the name a combination of Latin words for

‘tangle’ and ‘sound,’ as she’d proudly explained— brought together medical research and computer capabilities in a whole new approach to treatment. Symptoms in conditions like Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s were believed to come from a build-up of tiny effects throughout the brain: dense brain matter, neurofibrillary tangles, and rigid adhesions. The microscopic tangles were too small and numerous, too deeply embedded, to be dealt with surgically. Over time, the tangles gradually tightened and became rigid, choking off the passage of signals in the brain and killing off the tissue. So how to untie the knots? The Reneoscitor’s answer was soundwaves.

If two ultrasound waves crossed each other exactly right, they’d act like two needles picking apart a knot in a string, loosening the tangles in the neural fibers without damaging them. First the Reneoscitor needed to find the knots; it was impossible to provide the co-ordinates in advance. Bill had helped compile the research to teach it what to look for. Then it needed to direct the waves, accounting for distortion from the skull and tissue, so they crossed at exactly the right spot and relative frequency. It would need to keep adjusting in real time to achieve the objective. If the waves clashed the wrong way, they’d shred the neuron fibers and cause catastrophic damage. The Reneoscitor would need to learn what worked and what didn’t.

But unlike traditional surgery, there’d be no need to rely upon the knowledge, observation, or judgement of a fallible human mind. Or on the ability of hands to be fast and precise. Humans were frail and imperfect, as Bill well knew.

Dr. Singh’s footsteps approached. She appeared, wearing a white lab coat over her clothes as usual. “So, Bill Barber, here we are at last,” she said, smiling. “It’s finally ready for the next phase of testing.” She swiped her ID badge and opened the door.

Switching on the light, she gave an uncharacteristic flourish of the hand and in a carnival-barker voice said, “Ladies and gentlemen, come one, come all. See the wonders of modern technology. I present... the Reneoscitor!”

At the far end of the room was the vast bulk of an MRI machine.

The sliding treatment bed had an extra structure incorporating two small articulated robotic arms, like something you might see on an automated assembly line, except child-sized. The thing had an anthropomorphic appearance—baby arms, with the domed MRI machine as a giant ‘head.’ A nearby rolling table held a small device like a video-game controller.

Nargis explained where the project stood. The Reneoscitor knew what to look for now. And it had been practicing on cadavers and on live animals, learning to control the output of the ultrasound arms and improving its accuracy. “We’ve programmed the system to carry out a short sequence—just a couple of minutes initially.”

If the Reneoscitor could shake the neuron tangles loose and make the brain more plastic and flexible again, it would be like turning back neurological time. It was amazing, possibly the greatest medical advance in a generation. But Bill couldn’t help wishing he could turn back chronological time, so his father could benefit from it.

They had left the treatment room now and were walking to her office nearby. “Have you heard back from the Testing Ethics Board yet?” Bill asked.

“No,” said Nargis, eyebrows furrowing, “they’re *still* reviewing it.”

The project needed final approval from the Board. Early on, things had looked encouraging. But as they got closer to live human testing, the approval process bogged down. The Board was reluctant to step off the curb into an ethical freeway, and who could blame them? It would be one thing if the treatment candidates were people with no other options and nothing to lose. But for a person to benefit from the treatment it had to be done early, long before the symptoms were considered terminal. You might decide to do something risky for the greater good, but how could you ask someone else, someone still seemingly healthy, to be a test subject when it might do more harm than good? You’d be asking them to play Russian roulette.

“We’ve gone as far as we can with testing on dead brain tissue and live rats,” Nargis said. “The results are so positive—the machine’s learned to find the patterns and calibrate the ultrasound frequencies. At some point we’ll have to take the training wheels off and work on live



subjects if we want to move forward. But who knows when that'll be...it could be years before the Board is comfortable with autonomous neurosurgery. Right now, everyone's still spooked by autonomous test cars running people over."

"And if it goes wrong, we'll be judged by history for playing god and messing with people's brains," Bill said.

They had discussed this before, the danger of ending up in the textbooks beside the entry for lobotomies. Those doctors must have thought they were doing the right thing: fixing people's depression, their unacceptable behaviours, their inability to fit in. A simple doctor's visit, drill in through the eye socket and sever the frontal lobes, and the patients were supposedly all fixed up, ready to live a more *normal* life. Even when the procedure was stopped, it wasn't because of any moral concern about trading off people's spontaneity and ability to think in exchange for conformity. It was because there were new pharmaceutical options backed by corporations that stood to make a lot of money.

"The safest way is to do nothing," Nargis said. "Nobody gets hurt, nobody gets blamed. But we miss the chance to do something that could change people's lives—people who will be harmed by their own strangled brains. If we can just get past the initial hurdles. When imaging technology gets more precise and proven, and the machines get smaller, then Reneoscitor treatment could become commonplace. Once the idea of autonomous, sonic treatment is accepted, it could be done in a doctor's office."

"Or anywhere," said Bill. "Why not the airport? A kiosk right between the shoe-shine stand and the manicure place."

"Exactly!" said Nargis. "A relaxing brain massage while you wait for your flight. Loosen the knots and tangles. Keep your brain flexible and plastic, not rigid and crispy. It's the Fountain of Youth gently massaging away all the bad things!" Her expression was impish. "Do you think the lawyers would go for it? But seriously, if we don't do it, someone else will. I've included some rough projections in the Board application about how lucrative the Reneoscitor could be for the hospital if it succeeds. Think about the prestige, and the other good work it could bankroll. Of course, I'm sure the promise of money will have no influence at all on a decision

about the ethics of live testing.”

“No,” said Bill dryly, “of course not.”

Lesley and Bill’s seats were near the front of the Orchestra Ring. “Ugh!” Lesley whispered. “Why must people wear so much scent?”

“I didn’t notice.”

Lights down, applause for the conductor, and the music began: the energetic opening motif of *La Boheme*. The opera was really Lesley’s thing. She liked the spectacle, not to mention the social side and the networking opportunities. Bill preferred composers like Bartok and Stravinsky to the Italians. For him, the scenery, costumes and acting were a distraction from the music.

The curtain rose on Marcello and Rodolfo in their freezing garret. The two struggling artists, painter and writer, argued over whose work to burn for heat. Beside Bill in the dark, Lesley leant forward in her seat. The light from the stage highlighted her profile. She was beautiful. And their daughter was her mirror image. He hadn’t known Lesley when she was Irene’s age, but in the dim light he could imagine her at seventeen. As if sensing his gaze, Lesley turned and smiled, then shifted back towards the stage.

Bill relaxed into his seat. His mind soon drifted. Maybe it was natural that a story of young love and loss should transport his thoughts to Katherine.

He still thought of her. She would have been fifty-nine years old, same age as him. But, in his mind, she was and would always be twenty, not much older than Irene, looking exactly as she did when she turned to give him a last wave at the departure gate before her flight to Europe. The last time he ever saw her.

Would he let Irene go off to Europe on her own with just a backpack and the money saved from a part-time waitressing job? He couldn’t visualize it, neither the backpack, nor the waitressing. Things were different now; the world was a less innocent, harsher place than in 1979.

Bill didn’t usually spend time second-guessing or regretting choices. He hadn’t actually made many choices in his life, had he? And what could he possibly have to regret? He’d known from an early age he was

going to be a doctor—that wasn't a choice, it was just how it was. Thereafter all his decisions were based on their ability to move him towards his goal. But Katherine had made him choose, first before she left for her trip, and then again when she gave him a second chance, a chance to rendezvous with her at Trevi Fountain in Rome on a certain Sunday, thirty-nine years ago.

The first time was a few weeks before she was to leave for Europe. They were lying in bed in his room. "Come with me Billy," she said. "It'll be an adventure. I want to see it all for the first time with you. It won't be the same if we go after we're old and boring."

But to go would have endangered his scholarship. "You know I would if I could."

Later, when he received the postcard with a picture of Trevi Fountain on the front, he'd still brushed off the idea.

'Darling Billy, meet me by the fountain. I'll be right here on June 3 at noon, in case you decide to come for a month, a week, or even just a bowl of lemon gelato. I'm going to throw a coin backwards over my shoulder into the fountain and make a wish—don't ask me to tell you what it is. Your Kath.'

As the date grew closer, he wondered whether it might be possible after all—expensive and rash, certainly, but not necessarily impossible. But the flights were almost fully booked. The only seats would have eaten all his savings. When the meeting date arrived, he was still in Kingston, feeling irritable and sorry for himself.

He lay in bed at six in the morning, noon Italy time, and visualized Katherine waiting for him beside the fountain, maybe waiting longer in case he'd been held up and come late. How long would she wait—would she still be there?

There were no texts, cell phones or emails. She could have called him long distance in the evening his time—he'd stayed home from the library that evening in hope that she might. Maybe she'd called another time when he was out. There was no way of knowing, he didn't have an answering machine.

For the next few weeks, when he wasn't at work, he moped in his room, Paul Simon's *Kathy's Song* on the cassette player. It was self-indul-

gent, but he couldn't help himself. He was preoccupied at work.

"Why not take a week or so off?" his advisor suggested. "You've done good work. You've earned some time off."

In August, Bill received the breakup postcard, postmarked Athens.

Eventually, with moral support from Natalie, he got back on his feet. The new school term started. Katherine didn't return. He threw his energies into his classes, accepted an offer of admission to medical school at University of Toronto. While a Neurology Resident, he was introduced by a friend to Lesley Winters, a philosophy undergrad.

Her parents approved. They laid on an elaborate round of wedding celebrations. Bill's father's illness had progressed by then; it was difficult for him to walk. But he insisted on making his own way to his place in the church. All through the wedding dinner, he mostly kept his hands under the table, so people wouldn't see them trembling, and to avoid knocking anything over. Lesley's parents spoke to him slowly and loudly as if to a small child. Bill's mother had been a respected teacher in their small town near Guelph, but at his wedding dinner, amongst those smooth, well-dressed, easy-talking people, she'd seemed small and tentative.

"We're leaving now, Bill," she'd said to him directly after dinner. "Your dad's tired. It was lovely, but it's a bit much for him."

"I'll drive you back to the hotel."

"Of course you won't! All these people are here for the two of you. You'll be busy in the morning, so we'll see you when you're back from your honeymoon. We'll get going early tomorrow before there's traffic, so we'll say our goodbyes now."

Bill walked them to the cab and they hugged him awkwardly before getting in.

The swelling volume of the orchestra brought Bill's attention back to the stage. Rodolfo and Mimi declaimed their love for one another, their dreams for the future. The lights went up for the end of Act I. Bill's face was wet with tears. Lesley gave him a sympathetic, knowing look. "I know...it's so emotional, isn't it?" She handed him a tissue. Bill had been thinking about Hassan on and off all day. Rick Shuter

would have checked him on rounds and reported anything unusual. But he wanted to see for himself. On his way out, he stopped by the ward building. Hassan was awake and propped up in bed, the bulky gauze replaced by a white mesh skullcap that contrasted starkly with his skin. When he saw Bill, he took out his earbuds and smiled.

“Hey Doc, come to see my new look?” He swivelled his head carefully. “I thought you would have been out dancing on a Friday night.” Hassan’s speech was slow and a little slurred, but that was expected as his brain recovered from surgery.

Seeing Hassan’s open, good-natured expression, Bill felt a sense of guilt. Hassan had no idea about Bill’s hand freezing up during surgery; even Rick assumed he’d just been adjusting his grip on the cutting tool. Thanks to the surgery, this young man had a good chance at a full, long life. But things might have gone very differently.

When a procedure went well, Bill never felt he deserved credit—he was only using the skills and tools he’d been given. But if the failure of his hand had damaged Hassan, the full guilt would be his. He hadn’t realized it until now, but that tiny, almost invisible slip had really shaken him.

“It’s only eight, Hassan,” Bill said lightly. “Nobody goes to the clubs before eleven or twelve. Anyway, what’s your excuse?”

“Man, my doc told me to take it easy. By the way Doc, I want to thank you. You really took a weight off my mind.”

Bill felt another stab of guilt, but he played into their old joke. “About twelve grams actually.”

“Really? Cool! Too bad I couldn’t keep it. Mom could have it bronzed like my baby shoes, or keep it wrapped in Kleenex in a baggie with my baby teeth and my umbilical cord—all the parts of me that have come off.”

“She’s got a much better souvenir Hassan,” said Bill. “See you later, okay?”

The house was dark when Bill pulled in to the driveway. Lesley and Irene had already left for the cottage. He walked through to the kitchen. White-slab cabinetry with marble counters and touches of

walnut—that’s how Lesley described it. A few years back it had been rustic, like something transferred brick-by-brick from Tuscany. When they’d first moved in, it was modern Italian with black stone and steel.

Lesley liked everything perfect, part of what made her such a successful real estate agent. Everything new, the best—not only for the house, but the cottage, vacations, clothing, schools. Next year, Irene would start university; they’d be empty-nesters. Lesley would probably start hiring decorators to gut and redo a condo, like so many of their friends.

Bill’s father hadn’t been able to conceive why they’d tear out a perfectly good kitchen. He wasn’t there to see when they did it again a few years later. His father had been an industrious man who spent evenings and weekends doing jobs and projects around the house. He prided himself on mending, and using what he already had whenever possible, rather than buying new. Bill’s mother, too, *did* things rather than having them done *for* her: mending, canning, painting, gardening.

Once Bill started doing surgery, he would no longer help his father with risky jobs when he came to visit. He couldn’t afford to have soreness, a minor ding, or something worse, interfere with the dexterity crucial to his job. Once, when he was a surgical intern, he arrived home for a visit. “Look at all this hardwood flooring!” his father said. “It was ripped out of the school gym. They agreed to drop it off here instead of the dump. It’ll only take us a few hours to pull out the nails and run the boards through a planer. I would have done it myself, but my hands have been so stiff.”

Bill explained, again. He couldn’t risk that kind of work anymore. “Ronnie Jacobs could help you. He could use the money. I’d be happy to pay.” Bill could read the offense—disappointment, disdain—in his father’s face. The pile of nail-ridden wood had lain beside the house for over a year—testament to Bill’s having become uppity, a prima donna, a city person—until Ronnie Jacobs hauled it away to the dump, having been engaged to help with the jobs Bill’s father could no longer do.

Lesley’s family were different, separated by many generations from the need or want to do anything for themselves. Lesley was an expert at having other people do things.

Bill padded around making himself an omelette and listening to

Masabumi Kikuchi over the hidden speaker system—music Irene called ‘Dad’s crazy jazz.’ The rhythms and harmonies bumped and jostled against each other, melodic lines sparking flashes of poetry. Irene heard only cacophony. Bill heard the intricate push and pull of complex, fractal patterns against one another—the mathematical and the organic combined into joyful sonic energy. In a way, it was like performing surgery—sorting complex patterns on the fly, interacting, reacting, making split-second decisions and acting on them with skill and decisiveness. The flow of it, the immediacy, the elegance.

He ate his omelette standing at the counter. He didn’t usually use jazz as a background to other activities; he’d sit and immerse himself. But he had other things to do. He left the music playing and went down to the basement. The music filled the space upstairs even when he wasn’t there.

The boxes from his parents’ house were in the storage room at the back. None of it fit with Lesley’s decor. He’d been meaning to go through them. They’d sat here—the only tangible evidence of his parents’ lives left, apart from Bill himself—untouched for years now. Everything from his own childhood bedroom was here, and the time-capsule of things from university he’d stored at their house when he moved to Toronto. He was pretty sure where to find the right box, the one with Katherine’s postcard from Trevi Fountain asking him to come.

He found the box and leafed through a folder of papers, but the postcard from Trevi wasn’t there, only the one from Athens—the break-up postcard. Why had he kept *that*?

‘Dear Bill: I know I haven’t written for a while. I’m sorry you couldn’t come and meet me, but I know you were busy. After Italy I came to Greece. I met someone here. His name is Spiros. It’s beautiful here. I’m planning to stay. I wish you happiness Bill. I know you’re destined for great things, Katherine.’

At the bottom of the postcard, the pre-printed information:

‘Acropolis Museum, Athens. The Peplos Kore is one of the best-known examples of Archaic Greek art in the museum. Dating from about 530 BC, the white marble statue of a young girl would originally have been painted in bright colours.’

Bill wondered if Katherine's new boyfriend was hovering at her shoulder as she wrote. The handwriting was careful, static—no tailing off of the strokes that might suggest liveliness or forward momentum. It was neat as a copybook; she must have written a draft in advance to make sure the tone was just right.

He turned it over. The picture seemed unfamiliar; he'd probably been focussed on the message. A statue of a young girl with long braided hair. She was grey marble, with a residue of pale red on her hair, lips and the irises of her eyes. The red in her eyes made her look sinister. Maybe the colour had once been dark, and some elements of the pigment had leached away, leaving only the red. Like leaves in autumn.

The girl held out her left arm perpendicular to her body, as if offering something or gesturing towards the viewer upon whom her gaze was fixed. But somewhere along her history, the separate piece of stone that formed the outstretched forearm had been lost. There was nothing there—no offering, no gesture, just an empty socket.

Would he have stayed in Kingston that summer if he'd known he was choosing between the gay splashing of Trevi and the fixed stare of Peplos? If the rules of revision meant Irene would never exist then, of course, from his current vantage point, he must choose not to revise. But if, back then, when he was choosing whether or not to meet Katherine by the fountain, he'd known it was a choice between Katherine or not Katherine, then, at age twenty-one, and having no idea of Lesley or the possibility of an Irene, he wanted to believe he might have gone to the fountain.

But if he'd gone, could he have fulfilled his destiny in medicine, known the joy and meaning he found in his work, saved the people he had saved and done all that could be done for the rest? Sitting on the floor of the basement amongst relics of the dead felt like stirring up mud in the bottom of a river. The hollow queasiness and heaviness he'd been feeling the last few days grew stronger, bringing a sense that everything was ending.

In the years since his parents died, he had pushed through and held himself together. He witnessed death and grief in the course of his work. He saw mortality every day. He'd stayed strong: everyone *needed* him to



be strong. So why should the news of Katherine's death stir up the grief he'd never allowed himself?

He'd never tried to contact her, or even find out about her. It would have been disloyal to Lesley. His moral code didn't forbid thinking about Katherine, perhaps even loving her still, but it didn't permit any action in relation to her. It was the idea that she was no longer in the world, happy, perhaps thinking well of him, that distressed him. With his parents and now Katherine gone, there was nothing left of him from that earlier time. Everyone who knew him now knew the fully-constructed version, not the soft, partially-formed and maybe truer version from his earlier years. He'd known Lesley for half his life, but still he felt she didn't know the real him, the version that was there before the clay had set.

It was not his nature to confide. There was nobody to whom he was comfortable revealing any vulnerabilities, or showing any cracks in his facade. Just as in his professional life, he must never show self-doubt or weakness, so too in his personal life, as a father, a husband, and a son. They relied on him to be strong and steady.

He'd chosen school and career over Katherine, and he'd lost her. Now he had to face that his career as he knew it was over. The involuntary pause of his hand during Hassan's surgery wasn't the first time he'd felt he was losing control of muscles. The stiffness in one hand and in his legs, he'd brushed off, always finding a plausible explanation. Hassan's operation was the first time it had happened during surgery, and that terrified him. He had convinced himself the state of mental flow during surgery—the intense focus of all his training, skill and faculties—could override the tiny tremors he sometimes felt in his hands. Until Hassan's surgery, it had always been true.

Through his career, patients had died, or not fully recovered, and Bill had felt sorrow and empathy. But never guilt. He'd never had to question whether he'd given the best possible care. Now he questioned, and found himself wanting. He'd put a patient in danger through selfishness and cowardice, because he couldn't bear the thought of not performing surgery anymore, and because he was afraid to face his own future. He'd always believed himself a rational and compassionate man.

Now he wasn't sure.

There's no definite test for Parkinson's, other than post-mortem, but Bill knew the symptoms better than anyone. He was an expert on the disease. He'd put the pieces together about his father's condition—the stiffness, the tremors, the loss of his sense of smell, the changes in how his father held his body, his face. Bill had spoken to his father's doctor. New medications helped slow the symptoms for a while, but eventually they were ineffective.

He could only watch as the illness robbed his father of movement, bound his useful hands with tremors, stiffened his confident stride to a slow shuffle and then to nothing. And it wasn't only movement that was lost: there was the textbook progression from trouble sleeping, to moodiness, irritability, confusion, mistrust, and lastly, delusions. Bill had never visualized those same things happening to himself.

The perfume at the opera that had irritated Lesley had made no impression on him. He hadn't been able to smell it—another symptom of the disease. How would Lesley manage if he were ill and imperfect? She loved him, he had no doubt. But she was vital, energetic, always on the go. Impatient when things were not exactly right. She wasn't cut out to be nurse to anyone. It was painful to imagine Irene watching his decline as he had watched his own father.

And what of his own joy and purpose? Performing surgery made him feel most alive. It engaged all his faculties. It was important. It gave meaning. There on the cold concrete floor of the basement, he faced the reality that he would never do it again; it was too risky. Hassan's operation must be the last. He couldn't contribute that way anymore.

But there was something he could do, that *only he* could do. The answer was suddenly clear.

There was no traffic on the way to the hospital early Saturday morning. He badged in to the room then rolled the cart with the controller alongside the machine.

He placed his shoes side by side, toes pointing inwards towards the Reneoscitor. It was an awkward climb onto the bed; with no live patients yet, there was no step-up. His feet looked foolish sticking up on the

treatment bed. He was wearing the socks with the whales, a Christmas gift from Irene. Those socks might not have been a good choice for today.

Nargis had shown him how the controller worked. ‘Idiot-proof,’ she’d said. The start button would begin the timed treatment sequence—just a few minutes. He held the controller in his lap. A toggle switch controlled the movement of the treatment bed in and out of the MRI. He adjusted his neck on the padded cradle, his head between the ultrasonic arms, then closed his eyes as the bed slid quietly into the machine.

After a moment, there was a gentle shushing, the sensation of a crinkling sound in his head, like gurgling water—a trickling, lapping blend of high and low frequencies splashing against each other. Flares of synaptic activity through the visual cortex: fleeting images spinning and shimmering like coins of reflected light. A sound like cascading water became louder and louder. It seemed so real, as if the source of it was moving closer to him, or he to it.



## The Judges' Comments

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In prose vividly populated with detail and emotion, David Chau's *Belly of Tokyo* tells an uneasy coming-of-age story. With inflections of American *noir*, a cinematic sense of pace and storytelling, and a food writer's sense of the connection between what is being eaten and what is left unsaid, Chau creates a world that a reader will want to return to.

Naben Ruthnum, Author of *Hero of Our time*

A good fiction writer should take you by the hand and say come with me on a journey. In "Blabbermouth", Maude Abouche takes us somewhere we were not expecting to go and holds us there with polished, clear prose, realistic characters, and vivid imagery as we travel effortlessly from one adventure to the next.

Marianne Miller, Author of *We Were the Bullfighters*

Alison Stevenson's "The Fountain" is a tactful and poignant depiction of the paths we choose and the distinct nostalgic pain that lies in those unchosen. With the same careful exactitude that protagonist Bill Barber practices as a world-class neurosurgeon, Stevenson deftly explores the dissonance between Bill's choice to invest in his career and his curiosity in what could have been if he'd followed his heart. Written in charged and vivid prose, the story asks how we reconcile who we are now with the versions of ourselves that existed before the clay had set.

Meredith Pal, Assistant Editor, Penguin Canada

