



THE WOODSWORTH REVIEW

Woodsworth College's Literary Journal

Annual Print 2024



LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Woodsworth Review is produced out of Woodsworth College, University of Toronto. We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

THE MASTHEAD

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I'd be lying if I said that there was chronology involved behind this journal's thought. In fact, the inspiration behind this journal came to me on the beloved, yet unfortunately not immortal maroon couch in the Woodsworth College Students' Association's office. While they've since replaced the couch with a more modern, supposedly chic version, I owe my overshared thoughts to it. In talking about buying a new overcoat, I landed on a reminder to revive my idea of starting this journal. I pity the Association executive that listened to my blabber. She still does, but I've since not spoken about clothes. I've long felt the need for my college – Woodsworth – to have a literary journal. The perplexing issue is that I've only felt so patriotic about my college in the last 10 months. I suppose it is fitting that my inspiration sees its birth in that office, seeing how they supervise this journal. It's funny they removed the couch. Everyone loved its comfort – evident by the disassociating, torn remnants of it. But again, there are only so many interesting jackets.

I wouldn't call this journal a sister to our Arts and Culture Magazine, *The Howl*. That would be a confusing family. We're more like the friend they'd run into in a convenience store at 4 in the night, while also buying popsicles. We might seem like a stranger to them at first, but they'd see that we share a very niche interest and similarity – enriching the writing community out of Woodsworth College. It wouldn't take long for us to connect.

This introductory edition of the journal is harboured by pieces which both explore and interrogate notions of the self, love, memory and belonging. One of my desires through this journal was to see experimental approaches to writing. Not simply to see defiance to form but also an introspection of the themes they explore. I can assure you that these pieces will probe you into investigating the presence and application of the themes around you. They'll ask you to diffuse into the chaos around while needing you to laze in the lull.

In these polaroids of inescapable ideas lie questions which we've not addressed yet. They're here to haunt our norm while comforting our solace. Within this journal lies a place which is encumbered by lovers mourning over loss, children conversing with their grandparents, admirers of rain and workers who're anxious of monotony – all in a dispersing crowd with divaricating ideas. It seems to be a setting too fantastical while existing outside your sill.

I invite you to read the inaugural issue of *The Woodsworth Review* and entertain a probing of your preconceptions. My team and I have worked tirelessly to ensure that we provide the inaugural issue of *The Woodsworth Review* the utmost respect, which it truly deserves. Their efforts have helped shaped the journal incredibly, and this publication would not have been possible without them.

It is with utmost honour and delight that I accept the responsibility of providing you with Woodsworth College's first literary journal. It is extremely special to me given I can gift Woodsworth College with this token, on its 50th birthday. I wish for this journal to uphold and venerate the bold, fierce and courageous values of the Woodsworth College community.

Editor-in-Chief
Devarya Singhania
March 2024



Yours / Yours / Yours
Vic Gayoso Tello

Getting through six feet of dirt means nothing to me
if I'll see your eyelids shiver again. A maggot,
finding its way through you, before
I do.

I let it in, drink its way through me:
skin and tendon, mellow and forgiving.
I know what it is— to be needy—living
in translucence and off melancholy.
I've made myself willing, as the earth
that turns by my hand is willing.

I am insect-speckled through my elbows,
I am still breathing, growing still, breathing—
while the moon's pupil is ever blind—
ever still.

The earth wrings out, loses its shape. These
hand-carved dirt walls, adjacent to my arms,
call me manic—see me starving. But, again,
they've never bled, never been
halved.

Within me, now with you, I kneel and pray for
blue—for the mercy of the bone-white blur
that is the moon, that it remains mute, that
the body, though messily—that
this body—
may remember.
May our bones in death's eyes create us anew,
and have it known—nothing has ever been mine.
This wrung-out earth, this madness—never mine.
Yours. I've told you all this before. If I must
live off of memories, I'll starve.

Let death eat from me, but never
have me. Have me alive and
have me buried, alive, if it'll be
with you.

And when the dirt opens wide,

death will find me:
Yours.



I only see you when I sleep
John Chakkour

I only see you when I sleep
 how can I not remember your
 flaxen hair
 your face of plastic
 and its empty stare yet bares its
rubber fangs at me
 like butterflies
 you haunt my nights my memories
 fluttering at the seams
 your eyes
 were just the dulllest emeralds
 they still refuse to look at me
 I only see them in my dreams.



Writing Poetry on the TTC

Victoria Li

Maybe I just had an outburst of creative energy, or maybe
I'm really pretending to be typing into my phone
To avoid the stare of a man, and have landed on a poetry pad
In this wifi-less moving cage (what do people do
On their phones anyway). He has followed me from one car
To another where the group of rowdy girls has left.
To reach the next station takes forever and I hope the woman
Talking behind me or the girl in khaki pants to my
Left would pretend they know me, call me Christina or Joan.
Is it my long hair? My olive skin? My nipples
Showing through my shirt, even under a big down jacket?
My fist clenches with keys between fingers, lurking
In my pocket to ambush. My mind rehearses stepping back and
Plunging forward, and then

I should run.

I think about the strangers on platforms and newspapers:
A bloodied face slashed by the blade of a shard of broken glass;
A man whose dreadlocks flicker at the edge of a rail,
Dodging fists and screams (I ran for help, and I've stood since then
Always next to the intercom). I think about the student
Who was stabbed by a knife, who could've shared my course;
The floor and seats I see must have been once submerged
In gore-I'd spike into the flesh of whoever that attacks, like sliding
Keys in locks. I imagine testifying in court, "Your Honour, I
Would rather be speaking with you right now than lying in a ward,
Holding on to dear life. My ancestors sent me here
to live."

Turns out the woman is not talking
To her friend but to herself,
Gesturing hands in agitation,
Hair flipping back and forth.
When the train stops with a thump and the doors open we walk
Past her one by one (thank god the man did not follow).
Another stuffy day in metropolitan Toronto but the air around her
Different: is it the stink of unwashed garments?
The sweetness of youth decomposing in delirium? The sour
That clings to unauthorised liberation? Sometimes

I aspire to be like her

for on pitch dark
streets when I plunge
my arms in the air, chase

in circles an invisible tail, scream
the lyrics to a new favourite song, haunt
with feigned mania people I come across, I feel
once in a while
incredibly safe



My Vovo's a bit of a Hoarder *Elora Pharai*

The proof is in her home; the basement of our house.
Down the groaning stairs, it begins with a vibrant painting—
flaxen marigolds highlighted by a turquoise background,
surrounded by the sugary scent of Betty Crocker's vanilla cake mix.

The beige walls are cluttered with pictures of incubator babies and
her 8 older brothers, the ones whose names I can never remember.

Titi Fernand (??) is the one who stole Mom's slippers

Titi Eduard is the one who liked soccer

Titi Joe is the one whose house we'd always visit...right?

Each photograph has a jewelled rosary drooping from its frame,
metal crosses obscuring smiling faces. Tapestries of the Barcelos
Rooster pinned with pictures of the Virgin Mary Princess Diana smiling
on a wedding plate.

There's a porcelain sink in the back corner
where the bar was meant to be, a diamond-shaped sign,
stringy letters of silver are still hung high.
There's a shelf meant for shot glasses,
it's filled with cake toppers of princesses and plastic birthday signs:

Birthday Boys!

Baby's Baptism

God Bless Elora

Happy 1st Birthday!

Bookshelves that never held any books, stuffed with VHS tapes;
cases fading fuchsia to pink, bright green
to sour lime, tapes stretch from years of rewind.
Ancient issues of *Hello!* Magazine,
fading photographs of the Father
she'll never remember.

In the kitchen, ceramic cookie jars are filled with plastic shower caps.
Plastic-covered tablecloth of the Azores islands,
I trace each one with my fingertip:

Flores

Terceira

San Miguel (bers)

She's sitting in her armchair, draped in chunky blankets,
and I can still hear the melancholic piano of
the *Young and the Restless* opening.



Candlemaking *Gene Case*

The eldest, I had bought the alcohol
and stashed it away into my friend's trunk,
such that, when I arrived, already there
were half a dozen teenagers drunk on
my rum and vodka. They all knew my name.
What a thing it is when someone knows your name.
The kind of fuzzy aphrodisiac
that figures out your insides, like hot wax,
and you the silicone: that's what attention's like.
Or else: a perfect iamb, like a pearl
 resting below the velum, on the tongue,
 which fills the mouth with pleasure-memory.



My Church is Quiet
Joy Chan

mothers holding little boys
pastors holding little girls

calm pulpit murmurs
drowning side aisle ruffles
ecstatic choirs
sitting in pews
barn circus children wait for
service end as shoes scuffle

though I hear the churning of the underbelly,
it seems the congregation turns deaf

God, are you there!

chased from room to hall to room
tickling pastor, sickening song.



night shift
Ann Jacob

we don't see each other much these days, but
every time i climb up the stairs at 4 a.m.
(iphone flashlight, wincing with every creak)
i linger outside your closed door,
listening as pre-recorded rain
falls in time with your breath.



If It's Not Funny
Ngbi Nguyen

I haven't laughed from my stomach in a decade,
The kind of laugh you cannot fake & I wonder if I'm dead.

Dear child whose head I hold in my hand,
I hope you'll accept my love in the form of a Jackie Chan movie,
As I did with my father.

You needn't understand Chinese, nor know how to read,
For slapstick kung fu would be the language of laughter.

I am lucky my father always said I love you to me
But I love you I felt more than heard, as I clutched my belly,
Giggling so violently I could hardly breathe.

Long ago, a little girl me made one judgment:

None at all is a life if it's not funny.

As my father did with me, I will let you lie on the couch.
For you, I will brave the cold of the laminate & crane my neck.
I might ask you humbly, to please, lower me a blanket.

If I gave up all of me, would you laugh? With me?

If you do, I won't ever again question my vitality.



Rain
Pengyu Chen

I want the aroma of the
rain. To do nothing but to
be a part of the spring.
And the rain can rain
through me, inside me—
until it ends. That's when
my soul is cleansed.



The Top of Trees
Diego Calle

What do I have?

The tops of trees?

Seriously, what do I have?

The tops of trees in the evening sun?

No really, what do I have in this miserable life?

The evening sun's late light cascading down to triumphantly crown the tops of trees in liquid
gold?

Hm. You're a weird fellow, aren't you?



industry
Grace Hu

there is a bit too much
shrapnel in these books
to breathe in vellum
without the violence;
lead-cased pages are
hard to turn—
uneven lines wrought
straight and i am fitted
back into the formula.
numbers and letters ought
not to fall in love but here
i am, gun to the side,
mouth opened for the messenger
who spreads me atop the table
and bears his greetings
for the binary-built image
he devours. numbers and letters
ought not to fall in love
but as some call me parabolic
while others call me linear
i don't know if i function at all—
maybe it's all i can do
to pretend before they
wring me dry taxidermize
pour my blood into the gallons
they export each hour to
the most devout worshippers
who like multiplying
Leviticus 27:30 by 10 until
they've moved
all the integers to the right
side of the equal sign and

maybe then the Wendigos
of Wall Street are finally happy enough
to toss paper from heaven
let it fall like snow, like snow,
like snow, for all the hungry
people to swallow mouthfuls
of until they realise
that ice melts into water

before it even reaches your throat.
but i should be grateful
because drowning is better
than dehydration and
at least the messenger
fucks me instead of killing me
and at least you can get
high on opioids instead of
bleaching more every day
from asbestos until you're
white as their cheque books
and at least death is trademarked here
so all a pill bullet noose can get
you is a copy suit reminding you
that even though death is over,
taxes are forever and if you
pay enough you just might
be able to work your way
to the place right beneath
heaven's gates, where
you can ask for a bit
more paper with a bit
more words only for
the messenger to tell you
that you should be more grateful

for what you have, because while
there is a bit too much
blood in these books,
it's the best we'll ever get.



Portofino
Akanya Pasqual





And the People they are Dancing
Akanya Pasqual





Nimue
Jobanna Kiik

The lake outside the southern window has frozen over. There is a consistent sheen on the surface that can't otherwise be seen; the ever shifting gleam of the waves finally at rest. The window doesn't capture it well. The last couple to live here had cats who liked to scratch at the coating on the glass, and I've not been in the mood to wipe down the panes.

It is early enough that when I softly descend the stairs to the living room, the dogs are still splayed out on the carpet in the living room, fast asleep. Nova is breathing deeply with her head resting on her paws, the black blotches of her coat catching the glimmer of sunrise. Mika is curled on his side, dreaming; I know this by the way his back legs twitch. They are peaceful, warm. I don't want to wake them yet—once it gets this deep into the winter, it is too cold for them to go outside in the mornings. I stroll to the front door, the draft hitting my feet in socks. The chill is quickly soothed by the heat emitting from the crackling fireplace to the left of me. I pull on my boots, cover my hands with the woollen mittens my mother bought me as a graduation gift years ago, pull down my old red knitted hat over my hair and ears, and shrug on my heavy coat. I shove the door open, which creaks behind me as I step outside.

It is freezing. The type of cold that hurts my lungs when I breathe in. The wind bites at the exposed skin on the apples of my cheeks; a shiver runs throughout my body. My boots crunch across the layer of ice that has encrusted the snow. I prod at the lake's edge, testing for give. It is as solid as stone.

Walking across the surface of the lake is an odd thing. When she lived here, Mum used to call it "two faced". There is simultaneously a fullness and emptiness to the place, where everything is turbulent—the fierce cold, the blowing flurries, the bright white sunlight—and serenely still at the same time. She could be quite a poetic woman, though other times I fear she was too dull for that to go anywhere.

I walk for perhaps five minutes when, suddenly, there is a deep knock beneath my feet. It reverberates in my bones. My pulse picks up. My eyes skitter about. I stumble over my words asking who is there. Is anyone there? The wind whistles across the plain. I roughly brush the hair out of my eyes and look at the ice beneath my feet. It is clear, a deep blue-black that would have been worn by the finest in the 19th century. I shakily breathe in through my open mouth; a desperate attempt to settle my nerves. Then, again, a solid knock beneath my feet. It vibrates throughout my body, which rattles with the impact. I bend down and reluctantly touch the ice beneath my feet. It is stable.

I crouch down, and brush my mitt over the surface. Getting my face close to the ice, I close one eye and peer down. Blood rushes in my ears. There is nothing visible, nothing but a dark that continues far down. One would think it is a painting, a deeper and deeper onyx as the distance furthers.

I pull my face away from the ice and pull myself to my feet. My limbs

are trembling. I cough once, and hurriedly bustle to get back to the cabin.

In my sleep, I dream of my mother.

She was a well-worn woman. Worn down by the morning news, the mailman being late, the dust on the back of the stove, the woman down the road with her wife, the freshly boiled coffee scalding her tongue, even the living room chair springs being too “springy”. When I do dream of her, it is a frail mimic of her in those last few days.

Tonight, she was swathed in the knitted blanket on the couch. She was whispering something I couldn’t hear, murmuring quietly while glaring at me. I inched closer, keeping the glowering eye contact. When I was just close enough, just in earshot, she stopped at once. Then, with my face close, she barked out a rattling cough. I woke up trying to wipe the spit off my ear.

The dogs are awake this time. I slept in late, later than I normally do. With the beaming sun up, I bundle the dogs’ feet and huddle them in their winter coats. Nova is circling around the living room while I bundle myself in my own winter gear, and Mika is sniffing the back of my legs.

They both bolt past me as soon as I open the door. I used to leash them, but at some point, it was easier to let them run freely about. They let their energy out by sprinting the mile to the neighbour’s house down the way. He is a kind older fellow. He lets them stay there for an hour or two before dutifully sending them on their way back to me.

I squint at the lake. The glare is blinding as I tentatively walk along the surface, so I glue my eyes to the ice in front of my feet. There is that deep blue again.

A flicker of a shadow passes underneath me. I freeze.

It is small, no bigger than myself, and it is certainly not a fast swimmer. I slowly take a step forward, and the shadow mirrors the action. Then, in an instant, the shadow grows, shifting closer, and closer until it bumps roughly against the ice beneath my feet. The impact rumbles throughout my body. I stumble to the ground.

It hovers below my feet, as though waiting. I breathe in quick puffs. I reach out and touch the ground in front of me. The shadow floats for a second, before rearing up and swimming closer to me. This time, when it darts up, it gently taps. Like it is stuck, like it is waiting for me to do something.

I blink at it. It floats still, awaiting my move. I brush the ice with my mitt again, something akin to a wave. Then, I slowly lift my hand high in the air, and slam down brutally.

The ice doesn’t crack, but the ground shakes. My hand pangs with the force. I wince. The shadow is still, strangely calm. Staring down at it, I lift my hand again and slam down on the ice.

At the cabin, my hand is swollen and aching, tender to the touch and deep purple. The ice never broke.

Before I sleep, I toss around in the sheets, barking out wet coughs that pain my lungs. When I finally sleep, I dream of my mother.

At one point, she was still able to walk. She was not unaware that things were getting worse for her. Still, all my explanations and antics could never convince her to take anything, to see anybody. They used to take people to the beach when they were sick, she told me, for the fresh air and wind. I knew she just wanted the comfort of pretty scenery.

Tonight, she is on the lake’s beach. Her tiny frame is blindingly pale in

the summer sun, covered by a light knitted blanket. She is bony, with sharp edges and papery thin skin. She turns her head to me slowly, holding fierce eye contact, as though saying Look, this is good. This is helping. I am up and alright. I hesitate. Then, I open my mouth to speak.

I wake up coughing. The dogs are awake as well, though I cannot tell if it is because of the time of the day or because of my vicious hacking.

When I leave the house, I have a small fruit knife up my sleeve. It is something I cut apples with when fall comes into bloom, well sharpened and precise. The dogs dart out in front of me. I take my time walking to the lake's edge. Just before the ice, I take a few steps too fast, and hunch over to wheeze out, the air not reaching my lungs.

I step foot on the ice. The shadow darts beneath me quickly, following my every footstep. After a while, it stops, hovering in place. I pause, crouch near it, sweeping my hand on the ice above the silhouette. From my sleeve, the knife clatters out.

I pick up the stained wood handle, and turn it over in my hands. The shadow floats beneath me. I tighten my fingers around the hilt. I lift, and slam down.

The ice cracks. The creature darts back and forth in mesmerising circles, anticipating, frantic. I cut deep into the ice, fissures growing out around the slices, wider and wider until they form small crevices in the ice.

I see water now. Clear, fresh water. It is splashing on my coat, my woollen mittens sopping wet. There is enough space to see down now, to see this creature. I throw the knife aside, kneel on the ice, and hold my face close. Peering down, the shadow looks right back at me. Still, serene, staring. I come closer and closer to it. My nose touches freezing water.

Then, a crack beneath my hands. My stomach swoops, and I plunge headfirst into the deep blue water.

It is dark down here. Quiet, too. I don't hear the wind any longer, and nothing is pushing against me. I blink and squint my eyes before I can see.

I see the deep, deep blue. It forms a soft gradient downwards, where the blue finally meets a jet black. My feet hang below me, and beneath them, there is nothing but the same dark shadow of deep water.

Then, my lungs begin to burn.

My chest aches for air, and at those last moments before my lungs give out, there is panic. My feet give a quick, vigorous kick, and my body sets into motion, rapid, hoping, and pitching me upwards.

When I break the surface, I gasp. Cold air flows into my lungs, and I slam my hands on the ice beside me, pulling my limp body up with all the effort I have left to give. Just as I get up and out, my muscles collapse.

I am splayed against the cool, cool ice. My cheek rests upon the clear surface, and I am so heavy.

They tell you in first-aid classes that freezing does not feel like freezing. It is not cold. It doesn't send a chill down your spine or bite at your fingertips. At that final moment your body is freezing through, it is rather warm.

I close my eyes. Open them again. I look at the shining ice, at the bright, insurmountable sunlight. The lake outside the oaken cabin has frozen over beautifully.



The Holidays

Sarah Harvey

"I told you that I don't care about it anymore."

Marianne stared at herself in his mirror, occasionally glancing at him. Her eyes, red at the brims, puffy, though she lied to herself, pretending that they weren't.

Henry had his hands interlaced in his lap, sitting awkwardly beside her.

"We both know that's not true," he whispered.

She leaned her head back against the wall, counting each singular LED light in the strip placed all around his room, her eyes avoiding the small Christmas tree sitting in the corner. Ugly old ornaments dangled from each branch with small lights twinkling amongst the fake pine needles.

The entire thing made her eyes *sting*.

"Marianne."

"What?" As she spoke to him, she hoped it all sounded monotone, as if she couldn't care less about what he had to say.

"What do you want me to do?" she continued, "Sit here and cry about how things don't work out? About how I don't get to celebrate Christmas this year? It's fine, it doesn't even matter."

Henry wouldn't take his eyes off of her in the mirror while she spoke, because he couldn't stare at Marianne directly. Her gaze was bored, annoyed, and he didn't ever want those feelings directed to him. The idea made him feel as though maggots were infesting his stomach, worming their way around.

"Marianne," he said again; this time, practically pleading.

"Stop just saying my name," she stated.

Her eyes glared at the side of his head – he saw it in the mirror. His hands drifted from each other, and he clutched his sheets with one hand.

"It won't make me feel better, and you won't change my mind."

Her voice did not waiver. Marianne felt some sense of pride in this. Not because she thought it was the truth, not even for a second, but because she almost fooled herself.

"And why is that?" Henry asked, "Because you've decided that the one holiday you love, now, just doesn't matter? I get that it's harder for you this year, but that doesn't mean we just throw it away, right?"

Marianne did not say anything to this. She went back to counting the lights. While she counted, she thought about how last year, during the holidays, she didn't even spend it with her own family. In fact, she had chosen to spend it with his family. Decorating their tree. Eating their food. Wrapping their gifts.

Last year, that felt romantic.

Last year, that felt special.

This year, that felt unfair.

Marianne's blood began to boil. She wanted to shout at Henry for even thinking he could talk to her about the holidays. He gets to have a Christmas with his entire Christmas Loving Family, with their Family Decorated Tree that practi-

cally fills their living room, while Marianne would be stuck at her Mother's House in a living room devoid of a tree, or stockings, or even a family.

The jealousy burrowed under her skin, trickling in her veins.

"I will throw it away," she muttered. "And I'll do it gladly. Because, I don't care anymore. It's a pointless holiday."

Henry chuckled, though he didn't find it funny. Marianne used to love the holidays. And the holidays reminded him of when he first began to fall in love with her. He wondered if that would cross her mind too.

"I know you can't believe yourself right now. I know how much you love Christmas."

"Not anymore. It's stupid, and you wanna know why?" Marianne moved away from him, putting herself in the corner of his bed. She lowered her gaze and said: "You wanna know why? Because no one else cares either. I had to convince my dad to celebrate, my mom doesn't even want to, and my sister never cares. It's always me who cares every year, and then just gets disappointed."

Henry inched his hand towards her hand, and she slid it away.

He turned his palm upward. His finger twitched. He held it there patiently, waiting for the warmth of her hand to fill his.

But her hand didn't budge. Not even a little.

"Hold my hand?" he asked.

Marianne shook her head.

"Please?"

She stared at it.

"I'm done caring, Henry," she said, folding her arms together. She turned further away from him, afraid to see what he felt. His emotions were always sitting right on his face, and seeping from his sleeve.

Henry's hand was still laid out flat, waiting for Marianne.

"Tell me about what you miss."

"Do you want me to spew garbage about how I miss when everyone was together for family Christmas? I don't," she scoffed.

"I don't think you miss being all together. I think you miss."

"Did *you* have to convince *your* dad to get a tree this year, Henry?" Marianne asked.

The way she made her voice alter, the way she spoke down to him: the fact that she was being condescending on purpose — it stung.

"It doesn't help to compare us. You know that. It's not healthy," he said. His eyes began to water while he waited for her to speak. He tried to blink it away.

"Why? I'm just pointing something out. You didn't, did you? Your parents were happy to celebrate with you. They didn't need to be convinced." She laughed a little.

"What about us, then?"

Henry retrieved his open hand, and brought it back to the comfort of his lap. He held it there again.

Marianne's hand felt cold now. She could feel cold air brushing against her skin, and wanted her hand to be in his. She thought about the ways it would comfort her, and the ways it would hold her. She wanted his hands to wrap around her, and for him to tell her it would all be okay. And she wanted to believe him.

But she couldn't let him have that.

She couldn't care.

If it started now, it wouldn't stop; she would be left with the bitter taste

of disappointment
on Christmas Day.

And, besides, Henry couldn't leave his hand out forever.

"What about us?" Marianne's voice cracked.

"What about our Christmas? We have my little tree in my room..."

Henry finally let his tears create a film over his eyes, and let them slowly drop onto his cheeks.

Marianne wanted to reach for his hand more than ever, or tell him a funny story, or hold him until she knew he wouldn't cry. But she didn't. She didn't do anything.

"Does that not matter either, Marianne?"

The lump was pushing hard against her throat while he spoke, pleading with her to feel something.

"You're not my family, Henry," she admitted. "It's different with you. I can't pretend it's the same to sit with you one day, and then the next day you get to have a family Christmas. Where's mine? Why don't I get one?"

"Your dad said he'd get a tree..."

"After I convinced him!" she interrupted. "After I fucking convinced him! And everyone else! Jesus, it's not real when you have to convince your family to be together on Christmas!"

Tears streamed down his face. He wiped them frantically, feeling slightly insecure that he was the one crying and she wasn't.

Marianne's cheeks were flaming, and the lump in her throat was growing rapidly.

"I love you. And I know you're angry right now, and I know that when you aren't angry anymore, you'll regret saying all of this," he said.

Marianne grabbed a hold of his pillow and held it in her lap.

Henry didn't say anything. He cried softly to himself, almost as if she wasn't even sitting next to him. Henry thought about what she would look like if she were laughing with him right now. He wanted to make her laugh again. He wanted to give her a Christmas present on Christmas Eve just like they planned. He wanted to be able to fix it.

"How do you feel right now?" Henry asked.

"I feel nothing right now," she lied.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, I'm feeling too many things," she explained with a shred of honesty.

"I think it's okay to feel too many things."

He really didn't know what to say anymore. If he were being even more honest, he never knew what to say. But he wanted to say all the right things. He wanted to be someone who could make her laugh no matter what she was talking about.

"My family used to do things. My mom just told me the other day how when I was a kid we would all walk in the Fancy Houses street and drink hot chocolate," she explained.

Marianne found herself smiling a little still. She didn't feel like crying while she talked about things that made her happy, so she wanted to continue. Maybe if she continued to feel happy, they could both move on from this conversation, and talk about something better. She could be the happier Marianne that Henry wanted her to be.

"That sounds really nice." Henry moved closer to her when he spoke. "And we used to go see the Tractor Festival together," she laughed weakly.

"Oh, of *course*! The Christmas Tractor Festival! Whenever I think of Christmas, the first thing that comes to mind is always *tractors*." Henry laughed with her, and thought about what it might be like to see these tractors with her someday.

"We'd watch these tractors go by, covered in Christmas lights, driving slowly down the street, with people honking their horns, and waving. Me and my dad would vote on which was the best." Marianne's eyes began to water, and she turned away from both the mirror and Henry. She pictured the bright lights wrapped around all of the tractors, and the way that everyone had gathered together to just simply *be together*.

She thought about the music playing out of the tractors on some of the worst speakers she'd ever heard. And how that was okay, because she was with her family when they used to love to do things together.

"What happened to the tractors, Henry? Like, yes, fine, my family is falling apart, and everything is terrible but the *tractors*? Come on, you know, that's where the real Christmas spirit is," she laughed a little again.

"The real tragedy is the tractors," Henry smiled, nudging her with his arm.

"I just don't want to cry anymore, so it's fine, we can just make it about tractors and nothing else, it'll just be fine, and we can do something other than *this*."

Henry tried to encase her in a hug, but she shoved him away from her. Tears began to pour out of her eyes too, and the two cried in each other's company.

She pictured the tractors again, and her father's smile, and the way everyone was together. She pictured the long drives home to a bright tree and the lingering laughter in the air. All of the old memories only highlighted the parts of her life that would be missing now. No more trees, or tractors, or families and fun: no one wanted to do it anymore.

Her hair stuck to her face, glued to her cheeks. Henry moved the hair away from her eyes.

"It's okay to want a Christmas. It's okay to be sad that it's different now."

Marianne's head fell into Henry's chest. She spoke teary nonsense into his chest that he couldn't understand, but Henry continued to whisper that he loved her. And he would be there.

"Why don't they want to do anything anymore? Why can't someone take me to see these tractors?"

"I don't know, Marianne, but it doesn't mean that there's nothing left to be excited about, right?"

Henry ran his hand through her hair, twisting large strands around his fingers. He felt her snuggle closer to him and she pushed her head against his chest. The two of them fell backwards on the bed, laying together.

Marianne's stomach twisted when she looked into his eyes. His eyelashes were stuck together and elongated by his tears, reminding her that she caused him to cry. Reminding her that he had only wanted to help her, and in return, she had made him cry.

“I don’t feel excited, Henry,” she whispered, clutching onto the sleeve of his shirt.

“I know.”

Henry’s eyes drifted down to Marianne’s teary gaze. Her other hand reached for his face, and he leaned into her palm.

“I’m sorry for making you cry. I didn’t mean to not listen and dismiss you or anything, I just don’t know what to do. I just want to not care about it and forget about everything and –”

“We can’t control what we care about, Marianne. Wouldn’t you rather care about Christmas so you can enjoy whatever you have? Rather than ignoring it all?”

“But it would be so much easier.”

“But you would lose so much by ignoring everything.”

Henry saw her tears darken the sleeve of his shirt after he said that. Her hand slid away from his face, and her body curled.

Marianne thought about Henry, and the Christmas that they might have together. She pictured the two of them sitting, on the floor, by *his* tree. There would be bright lights, just like before, and gifts under the tree – and someone there that she loved more than anything.

She thought about how she would lose that if she didn’t care about Christmas at all. There would be no moments to share between the two of them, or laughs to be had; she would spend every moment of the holidays alone, and Henry wouldn’t get to see *her* either.

She knew she would miss that.

“Henry.”

He asked her what she had wanted.

Marianne reached for his hand. She felt her hair tie on his wrist, and laced her fingers with his. As she stared up at him, she could see in his eyes the good moments that the two of them could have. The lights from the tree reflected in his iris, the lights dancing around his eyes.

His arm pressed against hers, and he shed a small smile.

“Thank you,” she said.

He squeezed her hand. She squeezed it back.

“I think we’ll have a good Christmas, and I know it won’t be like how it all was before with your family.”

“But it will be something new.” Marianne let herself smile at the thought.

And for a small sliver of a moment, a spark of excitement lit inside of her.



A Town Square Execution *Li Granite*

Some say humanity lost itself when we started hanging children. Others say we've always been murderers. The people of Thistle held different opinions. And perhaps that was important, as Thistle was the only territory in the land whose rules of execution differed from surrounding grounds. Where others would simply send their offenders to prison, doomed to waste their years away in hard labour before being freed, Thistle adopted a three strike system. This was the Queen's idea, who saw her small kingdom wither away under the harsh realities of unexplained crime. There was no system to keep people safe, and she saw death as a quick, perhaps even amusing alternative. For those she thought deserved it, that is.

In Thistle, a first strike was a near warning. If one were caught committing a crime, as small as stealing a loaf of bread or as large as a mass scale robbery, a finger would be chopped off. If the perpetrator became a repeat offender, earning themselves a second strike, they would be granted a choice: to lose their leg or their arm. And finally, if they had still not learned their lesson, the third strike meant a swift public hanging, where the entire kingdom would be invited to shower in their shame.

But the Queen was not merciless – no, not at all. If one reached the stage of public hanging, it did not mean an immediate, inescapable death. Rather, they would be lined up alongside a slew of other kingdom criminals, and the crowds would get to choose just one, who would sacrifice their life to pay for the crimes of all. This not only guaranteed a respectable turnout, but demonstrated the monarchy's goodwill towards the people.

It was on a sunny, shameful day such as this that the town's three latest perpetrators were lined up for hanging. Sweat-run hair sticking to their foreheads, the trio viewed the gathering crowd, each praying for the demise of the other. As the trickling crowds began to settle, the Queen grabbed a scroll detailing their three heinous crimes.

"We gather here today to condemn those who have chosen to turn their backs against the good of the land granted by the monarchy. It is through crimes such as this that we lose our identity as a prosperous society. One of these men will pay the price of three; while two will walk away by the mercy of your voices. Are you ready to decide?"

The people hollered, pushing against the guards at the Queen's front. She saw their vigour as a sign to continue, unrolling the scroll further.

The first man in the lineup was up, trembling on the wooden stand. The loose rope around his neck scratched the beginnings of his red beard, drowning his youthful age in a rugged appearance. His eyes gave way to the fear in his heart, flashing in warning where they once sparkled. The Queen explained to the crowd that this is Kester Bronet, who betrayed the monarchy and its people. Despite national generosity and widely given rations of a bag of grain a week, he

was found in a farm neighbouring the castle, stealing crops. This was his third offence, the prior two bearing a similar nature. Two years before, he was caught thieving vegetables in the royal market, and five years before that, a loaf of cake. In his death, he will be succeeded by his four sons and three daughters.

As the crowd's scream grew louder, the Queen's face couldn't hide its annoyance. The people's expressions contorted as they lifted three infant girls and four young boys on their shoulders – surfing through the crowd. The children's red hair shimmered in the sun, while the tied up man's eyes bounced to all seven of their sunken faces. The Queen's mind flashed just as red, disturbed by the interruption to her performance. The mob continued to shuffle the kids along, all the way to the front wall of soldiers. Annoyed, the Queen motioned to her guard, who without warning, smacked the child nearest him right in the head, knocking him off a crowdman's shoulders and into the gravelled ground. The gathering fell into a stunned silence, interrupted only by a wail escaping the tied man's throat – tears escaping his hollowed eyes in a stream.

The second man in the lineup stood tall, head raised in a way that made the rope fall past his chin. His blonde hair was as riddled with sweat as that of the other two, but the crowd knew this was due to the heat rather than fear. The Queen continued, explaining his crimes to the masses. She detailed that this is Marchen Pilter, who betrayed the monarchy and his people. Without a common regard to the wellbeing of his own people, Marchen was captured leading a village rebellion. The Queen explained the horrid battle, how the rebels marched a hill towards a camp of innocent soldiers, who through their honour and courage ran a sword through the heart of each rebel – leaving their leader alive to pay publicly today for their collective crimes. In his death, he will be succeeded by his wife – a widowed wife of a traitor.

She let the crowd reflect on her words in silence, content at finally receiving the quiet shock she craved from her people. In this silence, she dared glance at the rebel leader she just exposed, whose glance now searched the crowd in determination. His gaze locked on a young woman with long brown locks – standing near a lamppost by the back of the crowd. She raised her hand silently, as the people around started taking notice of her saddened frame. Despite the grief in her glance, the woman nodded in approval towards her tied up man as the people riled by her, offering comfort. When the guards dragged her away at the Queen's wave of hands, she did not resist – a winning smile dancing on her lips.

The third man was older than the previous two – clearly nearing the end of his life no matter the day's outcome. He was gray in hair and heart, a melancholy overtaking his days in a way no person should grow used to. A mix of tears and sweat trickled down his untamed beard when the Queen began to announce his own crimes.

He was introduced as Ackerloyd Pickler, who by a string of ungrateful crime, betrayed both the monarchy and his people. A few mornings prior, he threw a string of rotten fruit at a passing royal carriage. Thankfully, the carriage did not hold her majesty the Queen, but such a shameless and disgraceful act of defiance simply could not go unnoticed. This was not Ackerloyd's first crime, he was standing with a long rap sheet trailing at his feet. Petty theft, general misconduct, and a long string of other minor misdemeanours. It comes as no surprise that this treacherous man will be succeeded by no one.

In the absence of a relative to lift or gaze at, the quiet crowd bowed their heads low, praying to a God rather than a monarch. The Queen took this as a

long-awaited sign of respect, and with the welcomed silence, she motioned for the people to come to a decision. Now armoured with the knowledge of each felon's wrongdoings, the crowd knew how this was going to go. Forming lines in front of the readied soldiers, each peasant voiced their chosen death, voting in a whisper to the soldier's ear.

The lines trickled slowly, each woman, man, and child over the age of 13 quietly voting for their chosen sacrifice. When the last voice was heard, the Queen took a passing moment to look at the three subjects of the day: still trembling at the centre stage. The crowd seemed calmer now, having spoken their minds in confines of their false sense of authority. When the lines fully backed away, the guards convened privately to tally up the scores, until the senior-most stepped up to the Queen with the decision.

"Who will it be," the Queen's voice rumbled through the town square, hungry for justice that would soon come.

The guard stepped by her side, and whispered a name into the Queen's ear: a name that made her face grow white. She looked at the guard and let out a laugh in disbelief.

But the soldiers, who she taught to be mindless, now had the orders of the people. One by one, they drew their swords and turned slowly towards the Queen. The crowd had spoken a name, but not one of the three she besmirched.

The three criminals became free men, rubbing their aching, rope-burned wrists. They stood amongst the crowd while the Queen's face ran out of breath, scratchy cords squeezing the life out as her legs waved aimlessly in the air below.

LITERARY CONTRIBUTORS - POETRY

Vic Gayoso Tello

Vic Gayoso Tello (they/them) is a Peruvian artist completing their third year of undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto, specializing in Architecture and doing a minor in Creativity & Society. Their poetry in Spanish will be featured in a printed Peruvian poetry anthology by the Colombian publishing house Ediciones Converso in May 2024. They are the winner of Mnerva Literary Journal's 2024 Poetry Contest, and their piece will be featured in the upcoming Mnerva Issue IV: Intimacy.

John Chakkour

John Chakkour is a third-year math major with minors in computer science and statistics. When he's not busy working on ten different weekly math problem sets, he writes poetry. He particularly enjoys reading Keats; more generally, any poet whose poems reveal an acute sensitivity to joy and pain, hope and fear, love and loss.

Victoria Li

Victoria (she/her) is an English Specialist student at the University of Toronto, originally from Hong Kong. Her work can be found in the Hart House Review, the Trinity Review, the UC Review, and more. She herself, meanwhile, can be found overthinking on the couch of Catfiends.

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Elora Pharai (she/her) is a third-year student at University of Toronto Scarborough where she is studying English and Creative Writing. Elora is an avid fiction writer, but also loves to dabble in poetry. In her spare time, she loves to venture into the worlds of different fantasy stories, she's currently found herself exploring the thrill of Leigh Bardugo's Grishaverse. In the past, she has written for Canadian Living Magazine, and smaller magazines such as Job People Do in which she has written about various topics such as mental health awareness.

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Gene Case is a second year student, studying English and Literature & Critical Theory. Their writing has appeared in Blank Spaces, Jelly Bucket, and The Hart House Review. They are also a blog correspondent for Acta Victoriana.

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Joy Chan is a fourth year graduating Political Science and Contemporary Asian Studies student at the University of Toronto. Her background lies in journalism and her poems are published in various campus literary magazines as well as those in her hometown of Hong Kong. Read more of her work @perillapostcards on Instagram

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Ann Jacob is a third-year undergraduate majoring in Health and Disease and minoring in English and French. After having read other people's poetry for years, they're trying out publishing some of their own. Ann enjoys piña colodas and getting caught in the rain, and isn't much into yoga or health food.

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Nghi Nguyen is an English Specialist at the University of Toronto. He was born in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam; raised in Vancouver, BC; and subsequently writes fiction about having to call many places home. His work has been featured in the Hart House Review, Goose Fiction, and The Gargoyle. He dreams of being a librarian, an author of fantasy novels, and a caretaker of many cats.

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Pengyu Chen is a fourth-year student studying Political Science and Ethics, Society & Law. In his free time, Pengyu enjoys taking aimless walks, imagining different ways of living, attempting to understand how people thought about themselves and their world in the past, and revitalizing his spirits by immersing himself in the activity of observing the rain.

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Diego Calle is a first-year humanities undergraduate student at UofT hoping to major in English literature. He has only just recently begun trying to write poetry and this is the first time he is publishing any of his work. He is very grateful for the opportunity to have his work included in this publication.

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Nationally recognized by the League of Canadian Poets, Grace Hu writes fantasy novels, angsty songs, and experimental poetry that adds a touch of stardust to the mundane. She grew up in Vancouver, and now studies international relations and classics at the University of Toronto. More writing content @ grace_should_write on Instagram.

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Ahanya (she/her) is a second-year Bioethics and Medical Anthropology student. As a visual arts student in high school, she focused on photography, installation art, and multi-media artwork. Being in STEM-centered programs, she has less time to pursue her art on a large scale, but she often performs side quests such as making cards for her friends for every occasion and bedazzling everything, from her calculators to her notebooks. If Ahanya isn't redecorating her room for the fifth time this month, you can find her basking in the sunlight, zoning out to Elliot Smith on a park bench.

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Johanna Kiik is a first-year life sciences student, majoring in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology and Cell and Molecular Biology, with a minor in English. She loves writing odd short stories and poetry, and grew up around parents who highly valued literature. Outside of writing, she adores performing music, learning about wild, edible and medicinal plants, and watching many period dramas.

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Sarah Harvey is a first-year student, whose passion for creative writing began when she was very young. With plans to study English, Social Sciences, and Creative Writing in her second-year studies, she aspires to pursue a career in education, with an aim to attend Teachers College upon graduating.

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