



SEA & CEDAR

LITERATURE & ART MAGAZINE

featuring
artwork by
Susy
Johnsen

SUMMER 2026



SEA & CEDAR

LITERATURE & ART MAGAZINE



VOLUME 6 • ISSUE 1 • SUMMER 2026

Sea & Cedar Magazine is a biannual print and digital publication edited and produced by staff at Vancouver Island Regional Library. We are dedicated to showcasing thought-provoking, exciting new creative writing and artwork by writers and artists who reside on Vancouver Island, Haida Gwaii, Bella Coola, and the Gulf Islands.

The Sea & Cedar Team:

Rachelle DesRochers, Information Technician

Aylish Dunk, Information Technician

Helen Godolphin, Library Assistant

Michael Indge, Information Technician

Darby Love, Customer Services Librarian

Emily Martin, Library Assistant

Casey Stepaniuk, Customer Services Librarian

We respectfully acknowledge that this issue was compiled and produced by settlers who live on the traditional territories of the Snuneymuxw, Snaw-Na-As, Stz'uminus, and the T'sou-ke First Nations. We acknowledge the privilege we have to live, work, create, and enjoy art that is inspired by life on these territories of Indigenous peoples whose connection to and stewardship of the land continue to this day.

Publication of this issue of *Sea & Cedar Magazine* was supported by a generous donation from Wordstorm Society of the Arts.

Cover Art: *Wildwood Trail* by Susy Johnsen

Watercolour with pen on ink on 130lb cold pressed cotton rag paper
10x8 in

All contents copyright © 2026 by the contributors. Copyright remains with the artist or writer.

Web: virl.bc.ca/sea-cedar-magazine

Email: seacedarmag@virl.bc.ca

Social: facebook.com/groups/seaandcedar

ISSN 2816-2013 (Print)

ISSN 2564-2596 (Online)

A Note from the Editor

Stepping into the big shoes of April Ripley, who founded *Sea & Cedar* in 2021 and edited it — along with many other tasks too numerous to name — until last year was daunting to say the least. Learning to do something new is always humbling, and I've had a lot of humbling experiences over the last six months as I've been over-seeing the process of creating this issue of *Sea & Cedar* from start to finish. From soliciting, organizing, and assessing submissions to designing the digital proof in InDesign, there is a ton of skilled work behind the scenes that goes into creating VIRL's literature and art magazine. Luckily, I had a knowledgeable and enthusiastic team to work with, whose names you can see on the opposite page.

I hope that my approach of wading into the waters of *Sea & Cedar* with an openness to see where the tides took me shows in our Summer 2026 issue. The prose, poetry, and art showcased here, I think, were all created in a similar spirit endemic to coastal living, where sometimes it's best let yourself be swept along by the waves.

Water is ubiquitous on the coast — the ocean, of course, but also lakes, rivers, streams. It seems fitting that both the artists featured in this issue use primarily watercolours. From Sheena Robinson's poem on spending days at the Vedder River with her father to Richel A. Donaldson's story about a young woman's fateful encounter with sea creature Likswaas, look out for water as you page through this issue. Happy reading!

∞ Casey Stepaniuk

CONTENTS



Poetry

15

JANNINE GRANT

PEARLY LIGHT

16

BAILEY BELLOSILLO

LAMBSQUARTERS

19

IAN COGNITŌ

BUTTRESSED BUFFET | SLIP OF THE MIND

23

MICHAEL PENNY

ALLEGEDLY

24

KAREN CHARLESON

WAITING

49

JANIS LA COUVÉE

SPRING ALOFT

50

SHEENA ROBINSON

ODE TO THE TURKEY VULTURE | VEDDER RIVER DAYS | WILTED

94

KELSEY EWART

INSTEAD OF FALSE OR LOST LET HOPE BE THIS | MY FAVOURITE ROOM IN THE HOUSE

100
— SEANA KOZAR
STILL TOGETHER

103
— RILEY VARDY
STONES



Short Fiction

28
— DANIAL NEIL
THE LAST POLAR BEAR

35
— CAMILLA ARNOLD
HELLEBORE

73
— RICHEL A. DONALDSON
THE LIGHT IN THE SHOWER

106
— ERIN ZINSKY
SEARING MELODY



Art

SUSY JOHNSEN

9

ARTIST FEATURE

ABOUT THE ARTIST

9

DOUGLAS FIR CONES

WATERCOLOUR WITH PEN AND INK ON 130LB COLD PRESSED COTTON RAG PAPER

13

WHO IS LURKING

WATERCOLOUR WITH PEN AND INK ON 130LB COLD PRESSED COTTON RAG PAPER

26

TAM'S TAKEOUT HIGHWAY 19A SERIES

WATERCOLOUR WITH PEN AND INK ON 130LB COLD PRESSED COTTON RAG PAPER

42

NILE CREEK LOG JAM HIGHWAY 19A SERIES

WATERCOLOUR WITH PEN AND INK ON 130LB COLD PRESSED COTTON RAG PAPER

62

SANDBAR ART 4 SALE HIGHWAY 19A SERIES

WATERCOLOUR WITH PEN AND INK ON 130LB COLD PRESSED COTTON RAG PAPER

84

SHIPS POINT HIGHWAY 19A SERIES

WATERCOLOUR WITH PEN AND INK ON 130LB COLD PRESSED COTTON RAG PAPER

98

CLAM DIGGERS ARBUTUS BAY HIGHWAY 19A SERIES

WATERCOLOUR WITH PEN AND INK ON 130LB COLD PRESSED COTTON RAG PAPER

105

MIRACLE BEACH HUCKLEBERRIES

WATERCOLOUR WITH PEN AND INK ON 130LB COLD PRESSED COTTON RAG PAPER

128

WILDFLOWERS ON A PEDESTAL

WATERCOLOUR WITH PEN AND INK ON 130LB COLD PRESSED COTTON RAG PAPER

MIRIAM JAKAL

14

OWL MY HEART

WATERCOLOUR, INK ON WATERCOLOUR PAPER

18

NUTS ABOUT INNER PEACE

WATERCOLOUR, INK ON WATERCOLOUR PAPER

34

THE ORANGE HAT AT GOLDEN HOUR

WATERCOLOUR, INK ON WATERCOLOUR PAPER

56

TOMATO OR NOT TO BE

WATERCOLOUR, INK ON WATERCOLOUR PAPER

72

WILL YOU MARRY ME?

WATERCOLOUR, ACRYLIC ON WATERCOLOUR PAPER

93

I AM NOT HUNGRY

WATERCOLOUR ON WATERCOLOUR PAPER

119

HIS ROYAL NAPPINESS

WATERCOLOUR, INK, GOLD LEAF ON WATERCOLOUR PAPER

129

BUBBLES

WATERCOLOUR, INK ON WATERCOLOUR PAPER



Creative Non-Fiction

57

NORMAN WAGENAAR

FIRST IN LINE

Contributors

130

NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTORS

FEATURED ARTIST:

SUSY JOHNSEN



Douglas Fir Cones

Watercolour with pen and ink on 130lb cold pressed cotton rag paper
10x8 in



SUSY JOHNSEN (nee Hansen), although born in Denmark, is an island gal now living in Bowser, where the local sights provide much inspiration for her art. She has loved art since primary school and has a background in graphic design. After retiring from her career in advertising, she moved back to the island where she primarily works in watercolours.

S&C: You describe yourself as an “island gal.” How does that influence your work?

SJ: Yes, my landscape paintings are definitely influenced by being an “island gal”. Most of them are created during en plein air excursions with a group of artists such as The Alfrescoes in Victoria and more recently, Artward Bound located mid-island.

S&C: How would you describe your style as an artist?

SJ: My style blends brilliant saturated colours with loose, relaxed brushstrokes.

S&C: You used to do graphic design for an advertising agency. Does that influence your current work at all?

SJ: Yes, my career in advertising trained me to simplify my compositions — every element must earn its place. It also made me deeply aware of how people feel when they encounter an image. I like my work to invite connection without telling viewers what to think.

SC: What medium do you prefer to work with and why?

SJ: I work primarily in watercolours for their spontaneity. When pigment is brushed onto wet paper, I love how it comes alive and brings organic movement to my art — that's often more honest than anything I could plan.

SC: What sparks the ideas and inspiration for your works?

SJ: Inspiration comes from all sorts of places. The funny twist of a fish eating a fisherman! Or how the clam diggers appeared when I was simply painting the seascape. I loved how the bright yellow kayak with bright yellow beach thistles framed the blue water of the bay at Ships Point. Or simply, inspiration can come from the inherent beauty that a location such as Nile Creek evokes.

SC: Do you have narratives in mind as you paint, or is it more about communicating a sense or a feeling? What do you hope people ultimately take away from viewing your art?

SJ: I paint from feeling rather than narrative. My focus is on mood — the way colour, space, and movement can suggest something without defining it, ultimately leaving room for viewers to find their own meaning. Often the story comes later, such as what happened at Nile Creek. I had laid my lightest green colour down when suddenly a gust of wind flipped it over and dropped it facedown into the creek. When I waded in and plucked it out, most of the green had washed off leaving a much much lighter tint — but to my surprise it actually enhanced the finished look. I call it art-by-accident!!

SC: What is your creative space like?

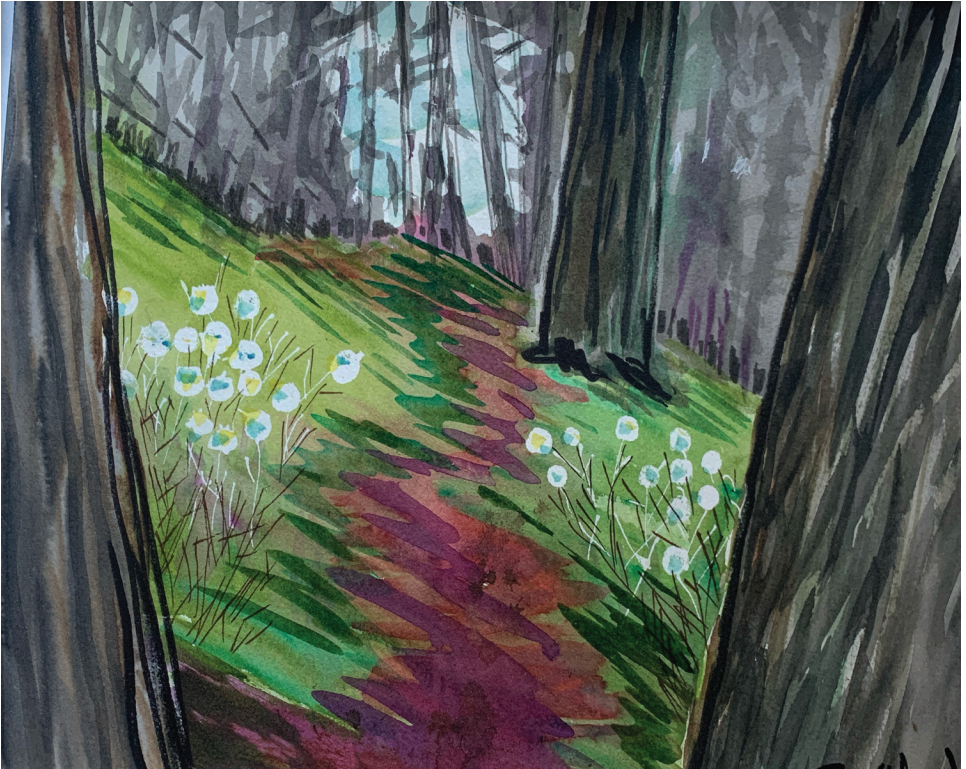
SJ: My creative space isn't one fixed place — it shifts with the weather, the light, and whatever life hands me. Sometimes it's the floor of my living room in my tiny apartment, where everything I need is within arm's reach. Other days, when I'm rained out while painting en plein air, my small car becomes a makeshift studio, windows fogged, brushes in my coffee holder and my palette balanced wherever it'll stay put. I've learned that creativity doesn't wait for the perfect space — it shows up wherever I'm willing to meet it.

S&C: Are there any other artists that influence you or that you particularly admire?

SJ: . Artists of influence (my shortlist) are Monet, Turner, Larsson, Rockwell, and Van Gogh.

S&C: Do you have any new projects on the go that you are excited about?

SJ: Yes I do have a new project underway. I've been dabbling with portraitures using a new medium — chalk pastels. (You can see them on my blog page at susy-j.ca). And because I've had a few successes I'm feeling confident enough to consider signing up for this September's "Portrait Drawing 'Live' Competition" at the Route19a Art Festival — which is way out of my comfort zone because as an introvert I'm especially shy of anyone watching while I'm creating art.



Who Is Lurking by Susy Johnsen

Watercolour with pen and ink on 130lb cold pressed cotton rag paper
10x8 in





Owl My Heart by Miriam Jakal

Watercolour, ink on watercolour paper

4.5x4 in

Pearly Light

Jannine Grant

Sky cracks open gifting you
pearly light.

Mount Benson's hulking grey body
illuminated pink
babies' seventeenth & twentieth
seasons spread wide in twilight.

Time's a portal, a passage
pearly dreams
you glimpse between trips to the grocery store
small hands covered yours pushing cold cart

daylight unlatched years later
large hands grab the wheel
long-legs stride off into salmon sunset
waves and crooked smiles giving them away.

Lambsquarters

Bailey Bellosillo

A weed between the rickety steps of your front door—
in lonely spring, a friend, and now,
vowing autumnal values, a nuisance.
Still, I stay, nowhere to go,
by a home I once called ours and a house you call a ruin.

Wilting, hoping to be watered or forgotten,
I overstay my welcome. I watch
you grow resentment, waiting for winter
to do the dirty work that you are too kind for.

You step around me, careful as you come and go.
You know where I stand.
How I crave the days you kept me company.
Now I wait, crane my neck when you pass me,
sway from the force of your gait.

I dream of ceasing to reach for your favour,
but I am rooted to the woodworks, our decaying foundation,
the remnant of my wayward friend,
your refusal to devastate the lamb you used to love.

Come back, retract the distance in your hand;
look at me, move me, or lie
and bury me under sweet pretense as I close my eyes,
playing back a gentle refrain of irretrievable May
to soften the blow of my killing.

You mistook what I was from the beginning.
You waited, excited, for when I would reach my potential
then saw me for how I am.
My full lacklustre form left wanting—your constant companion.

In the following spring when winter has come and I have
gone,
returned to the mercy of the earth beneath your front door,
still haunted by my faults, what I could not become,
I hope your window displays a bouquet
and you cannot recall my name.



Nuts About Inner Piece by Miriam Jakal

Watercolour, ink on watercolour paper

4.5x4 in

Buttressed Buffet

Ian Cognitō

for those of you
who have not twigged on
to the fact that squirrels
are the epitome
of fastidiousness, and industry,
consider this:

Douglas fir cones
deposited, and arranged neatly
throughout our garden shed

packed to the brim
in empty flowerpots
of all sizes

overflowing from cubicles
in germination trays

stowed inside an overturned
rusted watering can

filling up every corner
of each shelf
in tumbling mounds
of kernel-bearing seedheads

it's going to be
a winter
of great abundance

for this guy (or gal)
a Douglas squirrel's bounty
reduced to rubble, and remnants
over winter's long haul

a hoarder's hunger
amply nourished
to carry it onward into spring
and newfound opportunity

Slip of the Mind

Ian Cognitō

Remember that elusive word
from the other night?
Flirting with the tip of my tongue
from somewhere
in the back of my mind?

Well, today
it slipped effortlessly
across my tonsils
over my tongue and
through my lips
to take its rightful place—
all sense and sonic vibration
suspended and humming
in the air at large

My memory
can still backfill these word gaps
from its impressive inventory
breathe life into yesterday's blank spots
suit up for the perfect fit—
words and images on backorder
to retro-activate the conversation

A lil' slow on the uptake, to be sure
Yet able, still, to hit the mark
with *swift* precision
when I

least expect it

Apparently, it's not over yet

Allegedly

Michael Penny

I am the policeman of the world
investigating the crimes
committed in space-time.

My main suspect is consciousness
as I think there's a pattern
of looking for patterns
in the laws of energy and mass.

I have brought thought
in for questioning.
I hope to bring charges.

They will get off
despite the great self-
incrimination of death.

I know it's impractical
and I have a job to do
but it's frustrating, knowing
there'll be no conviction.

Waiting

Karen Charleson

On the bus trip into town,
I pass the dock and floats
where you used to tie up your boat.
Those places where you delivered fish, bought fuel,
covered the deck with groceries and supplies;
where you used to wait for me
to come walking down the hill.

Instinctively, I look for you.
Perhaps that is you partially hidden by another boat?
Third in the loading zone row?
I always look.
I cannot help myself.
I know it cannot be;
I have cautioned myself
against the expectation,
but I do not stop seeking.

Those milliseconds of almost finding are irresistible,
the quickening anticipation dries my throat.
Your boat has come in.
My waiting has not been in vain.
The past months vanish in an instant,
the heat of a smile rises in my chest.
Finally!

The bus continues on;
too soon, the docks disappear.

My breathing regulates,
the cold returns.



Tam's Takeout Highway 19A Series by Susy Johnsen
Watercolour with pen and ink on 130lb cold pressed cotton rag paper
10x8 in



The Last Polar Bear

Danial Neil

The bear came out of a rocky swale and drudged to the top of an ancient beach terrace. She stopped and swung her great head back to the sea — the argent polish of it, shapeless, a vast water without ice, the last of the drifting packs ruined by the sun. A strong breeze kept the flies from her eyes and riffled the yellowing fur along her spine. The wind had not changed it seemed — it pushed and shoved the short grasses and willows for millennia. But there was more to the wind now; it carried the heat of the land, the rising thermals that found the arctic barrens senseless and impotent to change the course of a melting world.

A distant madness was a memory of the Earth and she was part of the earth and part of the memory. It was the memories of her kind that kept her alive and moved her ahead of death. It walked in her shadow and gnawed at her belly, a presence without conscious intention but something out of necessity and perfection in the barrens. But now it was more than the passing of flesh and the redistribution of energy — it would be annihilation and a journey into irretrievable silence, into the collective memory. All was wrong in an interrupted evolution,

but still she endured with the mortal fuse of her lineage
belonging only to her.

For days she had been at sea in search of the ice. The seals would be there near their breathing holes. She would smell their breath. But there was no ice and there were no seals. And still she swam on, the black pads of her feet pulling her deeper into her memory, on toward the constant sun until her insulating fat was depleted and she had to turn back to the pebbled shore. There she scavenged the rotting carcass of a young whale, but the nimble foxes had picked it clean and the blubber bled rancid out into the gravel. She licked and chewed what was left with her old teeth until her gums were split and bloodied. It was not enough.

She had fasted over the winter and into the spring, and now the long summer starvation forced her out over the land. She had to turn away from the sea and the memories of fatted cubs that were but a dream. There in the den beneath her feet lay their bones, dying as they were born, never seeing the breadth of the sky or knowing the spring march out across the ice. She lowered her muzzle and remembered coaxing the still shapes with her tongue, their muted moans and then silence. It was long ago but time was not of her making. Then the bear raised her head and bellowed to the ends of the world, to the things of creation and destruction.

She turned inland and moved through the thickening willows and browsed on sedges and grasses. She flushed a lark from its nest and at once devoured the clutch of still warm eggs. They would not sustain her but momentarily appeased an urgency that grew increasingly dire. She had to feed well her shrinking bulk. And then a memory of a time when food could be found that did not come from the land, a costly time when the *Takers* came to the north in their numbers, desperate for things deep in the earth. There came a great thaw and then an unacquainted silence, gone was the music of life, vanished were the great bird migrations. Trees crept up into the barrens from the south and snow fell heavy and wet and collapsed the many dens and lemmings suffocated by the score in their lanes and tunnels. And the bears gathered hungry when the first spring arrived without ice.

And then the *Takers* were gone and with them the *Givers*, taken from their tilting shelters and famine. The *Givers* were the *People* and they hunted the bear as the bear hunted the seal. And the *Givers* prayed for the bear and they prayed for the land and now belonged to the memory of *Bear* and the oneness of all things. There was no memory of *Takers* with such reverence. They used up the Earth and discarded their food. She would go there, to the incongruent structures long abandoned now.

In the distance shapes moved in uncommon waves and the bear lumbered on with a singular loneliness. There were no other beating hearts in the consciousness of white bears that shared the *Bear Soul* — there was only her own flagging heart in all that space. And in the afternoon she overheated and stopped to rest on a hummock. She sprawled and the bones of her shoulders pushed against her hide and all about her was the land and a sky with a sun that burned and a wind indifferent to things it touched. It cooled her for but a moment and then the heat returned, weakened her. She wanted to sleep. She dropped her head on a foreleg and closed her eyes – a fitful slumber, but she dreamed.

She dreamed of ice and blue pools and seals unaware of her crouch and the mate who gave her the cubs asleep in their tomb, and she dreamed of a place, a gathering of every bear that ever lived, a land of ice and snow that had no beginning and no end. Then she opened her eyes and the shimmering abated and there in the distance, where the *Takers* drove down the devices of their taking, was a depression in the land and a pond that would cool her.

She laboured to her feet and set out down the slope through arctic poppies thick and yellow, a sea of suns waving out across the plain. She ran now, desperate for relief from a heat she did not know. She would die without the cool waters of the

barrens. And the poppies ended suddenly near the pond as if a line had been drawn and the water was dark and only its coolness occupied her. There was nothing else now, just the murky seepage from the peatlands and restoration. Then all at once her eyes stung and her nostrils burned of something foul and hot, not at all a cooling liberation but a savage betrayal of life. She could not stop her still great weight. All was slick and she swung to turn away but she floundered and fell back on her flank and the pond leapt upon her and she lunged to be free of it, heaved with all her will until she stood trembling at the lifeless margins.

Something unloosened by the *Takers* and she licked at her paws and limbs, contorted to rid herself of the poison. And now a fire in her throat and the bear tossed her head then rolled about on the bare earth and into the poppies, maddening to be rid of the dripping blackness that assaulted her. She regained her feet and staggered and choked and moved away from the pond, from death. She was already dead, but in her brain there remained a primal resolve to survive, to exist another day. And in her misery, she knew where to go. She had to return to the sea.

She moved away, heavy, her head low and her tongue frothed and lolling from her grim mouth. On she went following her steps back to the sea with the fire deep inside her now,

burning her alive, into the early evening with the sun sliding low across the horizon. There was only the movement of her body, the contaminated fulfillment of the white bear. And the sea was near but she could not smell it and she could not see. The fire was in her lungs as she gained the terrace. The sea petitioned her, stronger now, and she kept on toward what she knew. There was no deception there in the water. The ice was no more but the sea would receive her.

She stood on the beach, confused and dying, swaying above her failing legs. There was nothing now but to surrender to something more. She moved out into the water, deeper and deeper. It was cold — how the extremes of the world found her unprepared. And out into the water. There was no buoyancy left in her. She could not swim. There was no searching for a memory. She sank, disappeared, a sheen above her in the amber night. Then a last breath as she drank of the sea one last time.



The Orange Hat at Golden Hour by Miriam Jakal

Watercolour, ink on watercolour paper

4.5x4 in

Hellebore

Camilla Arnold

N*ostalgia is a fragrant, crumbling bloom: a reminder that the fleshier seasons are behind us, and the remaining fruit on the vine will die of frost.*

Rose closes her journal with the faded black cover, places her mechanical pencil on the bedside table, and turns into the fetal position. She thinks, my therapist would not want me to sleep with this thought-train rattling through my mind.

Then she thinks: it's the truth, isn't it?

She exhales long and deep, and glances out her bedroom window. The remnants of a foot-deep snowfall languish heavily on the cedar boughs, brightening the interior of the back-rooms. She internalizes this heaviness, slipping closer to sleep while her thoughts tangle.

Isn't it?



The next morning the temperature rises above freezing, and snow slips from the telephone wires and tallest branches of the aspen trees in foot-long segments. Rose watches the trees, which grow upwards on a slope from the riverbank, and sips coffee, her eyes narrowed. She embodies the shuddering relief of the aspens as they lose the weight of days old, frozen precipitation.

She suits up for a snow walk in a fur-lined coat and winter boots she bought ten years ago, boots stained with salt from the roads but still mostly impenetrable. The fur-lined coat, “vegan,” she makes sure to tell people whose eyes linger a little too long on the ornate hood, seems lavish and impractical, though it is the warmest jacket she’s ever owned. How she got through Vancouver Island winters with three-hundred dollar shell-like raincoats before, she is unsure. She walks tentatively across black ice which smothers the walkway, and dips her head last minute to avoid the angry, neglected branches of her pear tree, then reorients herself upright and towards the river. She makes a mental note to pollard the branches in March.

Rose was a perpetual giver. She gave so reflexively it seemed the boundaries of her personhood had been smudged by a cruel artist, laughing to himself. It was a shock Rose could

stand up straight at all.

Yet there is a sombre beauty to her fawn-coloured hair. Her elongated neck, slightly stooped from years of rounded shoulders, of caving into herself. Her delicate wrist and ankle bones. Her unusual dimples. Rose's appeal was not found in the big picture but instead, in the minute details. Often, it was never found at all.

For months now, Rose had been dogged by an intermittent depression. This brand of numbness renders her at once hyperaware and removed, and the insulating nature of February snow only amplifies her internal state.

Today, Rose wonders why she bothers to walk. She reads the research articles, talks to well-meaning friends. The importance of daily walks urges itself into her awareness, unsolicited: another pushy stranger demanding her attention and disguising this need as beneficial. Now, she engages unfamiliar calf and abdominal muscles with each step to avoid slipping onto her back in the damned snow.

Rose notes two changes in the backyard since she was last out here, paying attention: the river is now a full, rushing

basin, with a level of purpose that strikes envy in her gut. And the branches of the redflower currants now exude one-inch salutations of velvet, lime green foliage.

That evening, she writes again. *I spend six months of the year unaware of the deciduous trees all around me—then, suddenly, they reawaken.*



A week later, Rose is distracted by raspberry seeds wedged between the cracks in her molars. The laundry, most of it, is splayed out on the bed beside her in a disheveled pyramid. She is halfway through her book, *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, by Joyce Carol Oates. She knows this not by the page numbers but by the book's shape, spread open, face down, spine cracked, covers perfectly straight-across. Still.

She herself is splayed facedown on the bed, silent stories spilling out from under her. Her bottom a rising, somewhat dimpled mound which differentiates her from the flat plane of the book cover. She lifts her backside a few inches further, feeling the base of her spine tingle while she waits for him. He climbs along her until his breath drips towards her ear, then kisses her silently and full. Today, once again, his saliva tastes like iron.

She thinks of the few men she has kissed who have the iron taste. It's her favourite. Some primal urge originating from her womb, maybe, makes her seek out the same mineral she loses in excess, according to her team of doctors, most months.

As he enters her, some recent lab report flashes across Rose's awareness, the word Ferritin highlighted in red – the colour a scant mimicry of heme groups rearranging somewhere deep in her tissues.

She thinks of all the minerals that make a human body. The copper. The zinc. The phosphorous. These thoughts make her receptive, even hungry, and she arches her back further, reaching open-mouthed for traces of iron like a baby bird, forgetting the downturned book in her peripheral vision.



I was happier then, she thinks. Hours later. And then, another voice, one she is unfamiliar with but has sensed around the periphery of her awareness for the past few days barges in: so what?

So what? She writes, pencil slipping across her sweaty fingers, *I was happier then. Now I'm awake.*

She closes the diary, rolls over, and slips into empty sleep.



4:04 am. Rose wakes to a chest-exploding familiarity. Tachycardia, 130 beats per minute, shortness of breath, legs aching with adrenaline, back instantly damp. She bolts upright, dizzy, checks her pulse, enters what she calls Grey Space.

Grey Space is liminal. It is intentional. Rose lets herself fall between the cracks of physiological panic and eventual calm. She recognizes she will clamber out the other side, usually after five minutes, and let her body ride the adrenaline until the chemicals burn up.

Grey Space is terrifying. But without Grey Space, Rose is a boat capsized by the storm of panic. She will run anywhere to make it stop. This only reinforces the hold it has on her.

In Grey Space, Rose counts her exhales, ensures they are longer than her inhales. She reaches slowly for her pulse oximeter, careful not to amplify her adrenals further with sudden movements. She watches the blue twinkling lights of her pulse oximeter shift and calibrate with her exhalations. O2 98%, 99%, 98%. Good. BPM 118, 106, 114. Okay. She sinks onto

her blinking device. In Grey Space, she gathers her tools and fixates on sensation. This time, it is the pulse oximeter, which hugs her index finger, that distracts her from her chest's gasping desperation. BPM 102, 96, 98. Almost out. 97, 89, 94. She crawls over the edge of panic onto the solid ground of almost-calm acquiescence. Exhausted, body whipped around like a doll, she collapses into sleep.



I thought I was immortal. Now I'm slowly dissolving the audacity to save myself for a better day.

Now, most mornings hover above zero. The snow melted a week ago. Rose closes her journal, grabs her boots, perpetually wet these days, and her fluffy jacket. She drives to the Nanaimo waterfront. This time, she slides open the shade on her moon-roof to allow extra light. Even grey, it is serotonin.

It is one of those rare late-winter mornings where the ocean radiates a blue so vibrant that Rose will change her entire course, and if she can, her plans, to keep it in her periphery as long as possible.

Rose walks the promenade, resisting the harsh breeze whipping her ears. She locates a small deer trail that skirts the



Nile Creek Log Jam Highway 19A Series by Susy Johnsen
Watercolour with pen and ink on 130lb cold pressed cotton rag paper
10x8 in



playground and turns inland, leaving the ocean.

She thinks: I have been good. For years, I have been good. Goodness has failed me.

This thought plays again and again in her mind, rhythmically, and she attunes her footsteps to its stoic pace: for years, for years, for years, for years—

A cluster of plants straining against their bark-mulch bed stops her. Rose crouches. At first, she only notices the shoots of snowdrops which display a combination of shy beauty and dripping fragility. She retrieves her phone from her coat pocket and focuses the lens on the snowdrops, swiping up for botanical information: *Galanthus nivalis*. As she positions herself so close to the snowdrops that some brush dew against her cheeks, a second plant emerges in Rose's field of vision.

This one, a dusty burgundy with cord-like stalks. Fleshy petals that look grey on the undersides and robust leaves surround a prominent center with eager anthers which stretch towards Rose, threatening her nose with pollen stains.

Rose feels a jolt in her solar plexus. She snaps a picture of

the unknown, intrusive flowers, and stands. Her knees crack audibly and her lower back pinches.

“Fuck walking. I mean really, fuck it,” she mumbles, to the pace of her angry footsteps.

The refrain is no longer ‘for years, for years, for years,’ but instead, ‘fuck it, fuck it, fuck it.’ For the first time in weeks, Rose smiles in such a way that the dimple flanking her right cheekbone re-emerges.



Something is happening, no, waking up inside my brain, but I'm not sure what. I—

Rose puts down her mechanical pencil which sinks into the folds of her duvet as she throws back her covers, gets out of bed, and grabs her phone, charging placidly, from the kitchen.

She scrolls through her gallery, stops when she sees the surprise flowers. She taps the information button, which reveals to her the scientific and common name: Hellebore. Lenton Rose. “A perennial flowering plant and species of hellebore in the buttercup family...”

“That’s... a rose?”

Rose turns onto her side, stares deeper into her phone screen. Her pupils constrict and dilate in pulsed intervals as she blinks into darkness, then reopens her eyes onto the vivid blue light. The veined petals. The saw-like ridges alongside each mature leaf, out of which baby leaves emerged, reaching upwards. Textural intricacies almost prehistoric. The plant was less a flower, and more a testament to vibrancy among the monochromatic bounds of February.

She smooths out her duvet, finds her pencil, and writes:
ecospection > introspection?



12:53 am. Another surge of adrenaline wakes Rose from sleep. This time, she welcomes Grey Space quickly. Sits on the edge of the bed, exhales. She reaches into her Drawer of Doom and feels for the small bottle of Ativan. She recalls the pharmacist’s counsel: as needed. Her palm grows sweaty against the bottle, which rattles slightly in response. I need this, she thinks.

Rose lets one 0.5mg pill dissolve under her tongue and welcomes the bitter taste. She stands. She walks to the front

door, passes the stove light which mocks her for only sleeping an hour this time before the panic came knocking. To the front door, which she opens.

The cold air rushes her nostrils, her slightly open mouth. It smells different, she thinks. Like wet grass. No —

Wet grass painted with the dew of possibility she writes, ten minutes later, once her heart rate has stopped tripping but instead, lumbers.

Whatever that means, she thinks, lowering onto her favoured side, drinking water sideways from her glass, swallowing the awkward mouthful, and falling asleep.

Three weeks later, Rose walks in Linley Valley. She spots delicate green shoots bursting forth from their topsoil blankets along the trail. There is birdsong guiding her forward on her walk. The trail-side creeks are enthusiastic. The salmonberry bushes have traces of verdant life. Her knees still crack, but her mind is a little quieter these days. A little.

On her drive home, she passes a blooming camellia tree. The sudden fuchsia splashes of petals drooping over the sidewalk makes her gasp. In her rearview, she sees only the tree. Only

the petals. Only this vibrant shock of new life.

*There's a forest in my veins that urges me forward, she writes
that night.*

And though it's early, why not bloom now?

Spring Aloft

a pantoum

Janis La Couvée

bleeding sky, charcoal clouds adrift
woodpecker hammers light standard
holds spring aloft with drumming
in bog and seep

woodpecker hammers light standard
bright yellow swamp lanterns
in bog and seep
light the way

bright yellow swamp lanterns
light the way
days lengthen
feel thrust and pull of sprouting

days lengthen
green unfurls
feel thrust and pull of sprouting
continues a rampage in forest and field

green unfurls
holds spring aloft with drumming
continues a rampage in forest and field
bleeding sky, charcoal clouds adrift

Ode to the Turkey Vulture

Sheena Robinson

Oh sweet nestling, white
cotton down and little black face,
all beak.

Hatched in a dim thicket,
flightless and weak.
Horrid little dinosaur, hissing
at the world, your looks
will decay at first,
then kettle upwards
into grace,
a black brooding bird,
blood-
red head.

Gliding on thermals,
soaring the cobalt sky in circles,
a harbinger of death
on the highway —
roadkill to feast upon, keeping
the land clean for
the ungrateful.

Vedder River Days

Sheena Robinson

Dad, we had the best days.
Rides in the slow lane,
the backs of my thighs stuck
to the black leather bench seat
of your mustard yellow '73 Dodge Ram.
No radio, windows down, your left arm freckling
in the summer sun.
Leaving the garbage strike city
for the Fraser Valley.
Passing through the stink of manure lined fields,
we pulled up under the poplars and walked along
the warm flat stones of the Vedder River.

I spotted a leaf printed on a rock.
A fossil! I said, turning the chunk of shale
over in my hands.
Millions of years of heat and pressure
had ensured this thin layer of carbon,
an impression of a leaf,
remained for me to find and hold
in my pocket until it chafed my leg
and I placed it on a log where
I would forget to remember it.

You were there for work,
protecting spawning grounds
from bulldozing yellow Cats.
You did not wear a hat and refused sunscreen,

two decisions you would later regret.
What kind of salmon, daddy?
You pulled a bent cigarette from the pocket
of your blue flannel shirt, cupped
your hands to your mouth and lit it,
back hunched against the algae breeze.
Chinook, Sockeye, Coho, Pink, and Chum.
Steelhead too,
but those are more like big trout.
I nodded, tossed a stick in the water
and the river carried it away.

You smiled and scooped up
a handful of pebbles and strained them
through your fingers as if panning for gold.
A small twig remained.
Do you know what this is?
I stared, squinting under the searing sky
for a long moment until
the twig quivered in your palm.
A caddisfly.
Just after its entry into this world,
it begins to weave a case with silk,
sand, pebbles, wood
and even tiny snail shells.
It lives as a larva in its little
wooden home for two years, filtering
debris through six gills until
one day it crawls out of its aqua world
and flies into the wind,
only to die two weeks later.
A snack for salmon perhaps,
or a steelhead,
which is more like a big trout.

You waved at the crew on our way out
but they turned their backs.
Shrugging, you pointed at all the webs
of the tent caterpillars
and said it was a bad year for them,
or good,
depending on how you looked at it.
We stopped for secret snacks that would surely ruin
mom's dinner, lime soda and roasted peanuts.
One last stop for blueberries and corn
on the cob and we were back in the slow lane.
Was it in my head or were you driving slower?
Did you not want to go home to mom
and the dinner we would have in silence,
but for the scrapes of forks
on the brown earthenware plates?
We had the best days, Dad.

Wilted

Sheena Robinson

The house is finally quiet.
I step onto the back porch
to water the tomato plants.
I may be too late,
even later than summer came
this year, sudden and unapologetic.
The leaves have curled, baked
in the heat.
I water the soil anyways,
closing my eyes and turning
my face to the relentless sun, seeing
beyond the scarlet blood vessels
in my eyelids and I am suddenly
on my grandma's deck
fifty-two miles south-east
and seven summers ago.

The sunlight kisses her thin skin
as the wind chimes play a ditty
in the Gulf Island breeze.
She smiles, eyes closed, humming
softly and patting gnarled, ringed
hands on her shrinking lap.
Anna's hummingbirds hover over her
and the bumble bees visit each petal of
the red geraniums that frame
this sacred space.
She takes in a lilac breath

and exhales softly, slowly,
not here,
but dancing in the arms
of the handsome navy officer,
4,000 miles to the east
and 70 summers ago.
Back when something as insidious
as war brought love to her, and life,
her children and one grandchild.
Before pain and loss, before
she was alone
and her mind began to forget
if she had eaten today or
called anyone lately, or why
she had come out to the back deck.

I jump back as water streams
down through the soil and onto
my bare feet.
If they had not dried out
completely yet, the tomato plants
will now surely drown.



Tomato or Not To Be by Miriam Jakal
Watercolour, ink on watercolour paper
4.5x4 in

First in Line

Norman Wagenaar

I would have first met Rudy just before 6 a.m. one day in late November, standing on the sidewalk in front of the day labour place in downtown Nanaimo. He would have been smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, wearing steel-toed gumboots, waterproof overalls with the plastic starting to flake, a dun-coloured hoodie and a weathered ball cap.

A gaggle of men — they were all men — talked among themselves. There was Donnie, short and twitchy, straw-coloured moustache neatly clipped and combed; Jason, a quiet solid-built guy with a jet-black ponytail; and various other characters in scuffed boots and jeans spattered with roofing tar, shuffling their feet, rubbing their hands together against the damp chill.

Rudy stood apart, silent, greeting no one, expression neutral, appraising the lineup. Cradling that cigarette. First in line. Every day I saw him there. First in line meant first through the door, first to sign on the list, first for the best work or at least first for the best chance of work if there was not enough to go

around. That was the theory, anyway.

The door swung open 6 a.m. sharp and, once through, there was a foyer with maybe 20 chairs, a trolley with a coffee maker, paper cups, sugar and whitener, a counter, and Mike, a wiry Irish-looking guy whose defence against anyone asking him too many questions was to maintain a permanent appearance of being in a shitty mood.

Rudy would have told you he was first in line to get the best work, or the best chance of work, but the reality was more nuanced. The day labour place was located next door to the Salvation Army shelter, where an admirably committed and patient staff devoted themselves to Nanaimo's homeless population. Every day would see some of the shelter sleepers at the labour place looking for a day's work and pay. Though many were capable of eight hours work, not all were. It fell to Mike to select the able-bodied and able-minded from the weak and the broken.

It was a task he did with considerable tact and diplomacy, given the pissed-off demeanour he usually presented to the world. Or maybe that foul state was a learned tactic, and Mike was Mr. Happy-Go-Lucky after hours. I was never sure. The rejected didn't complain, but would hang out for a while, drain the coffee machine, gossip about food at the free breakfast place, the big money they had once made working on a fishing

boat, the state of their rotten teeth, and then they would filter out. I was the object of Mike's judgment just once, to my benefit. A job had come in stripping wooden forms from concrete curbs and sidewalks at a heritage train station renovation project. Mike picked out Rudy and Jason, and a couple of others, and sent them on their way. I'd been passed over and stepped up to the counter to ask why. Mike waved me off. "Not for you, Grandpa. Those forms weigh a ton when they're soaking wet. I was there yesterday and it almost killed me."

Donnie seemed to think he and Mike had a special relationship. Donnie would dart around the foyer, ask Mike if he wanted more coffee, and — alone of all the waiting workers — dared to encroach on Mike's side of the counter, load paper into the copier, look over Mike's shoulder at the computer screen displaying the workers' records. Yakking all the while, cadging his favourite jobs. "Hey Mikey, can you get me into the Sally Anne warehouse again this week? Last time I picked up these great kicks and a backpack," and "Hey Mikey, they really like me at the aluminum siding place, don't they? Worked three hours and got paid for four," and "Hey Mikey, remember I cut the grass at the bosses' mother's place in Cedar last summer? She gave me lemonade!" Mike tolerated Donnie's sidekick attentions. This was very mysterious; anyone else invading Mike's side of the counter would have been told to

fuck off.

I had a vehicle — a pickup truck I bought for the garden-ing business I was starting – which gave me an edge on the job assignment front, even when I failed to be first in line in the morning. Pretty early on Mike started pairing me with Rudy and, over the course of the couple of winters that I did day labour in Nanaimo, he and I worked maybe a dozen jobs together — demolition in Duncan, property clean-up at a condo, offloading a sea-can of household goods for new arrivals from Hong Kong, single and multi-day gigs. I pretty quickly found that Rudy was smart, easy-to-get along with, and had a wry sense of humour. I looked forward to working with him.

He was tough as nails. I found this out the hard way when I replaced him on one of his regular gigs: working as a swamper on a truck from an American window manufacturer that came north from Washington a day a week to spend 12 hours delivering around Southern Vancouver Island. Rudy liked the job because the long day meant a good payout.

I met the truck at a commercial fuel stop south of town. The driver was maybe 30, short red hair, no neck. “Where’s the other guy?” he asked. Didn’t introduce himself, didn’t want to know my name. Didn’t reach out his hand for a shake.

“Couldn’t make it,” I said.

The driver responded with a grunt. It was his job to get the windows to the back of the trailer. It was my job, as the swamper, to carry them from the back of the truck to wherever they were needed — mostly building sites for new houses or renovation projects.

This went okay for the first while. The windows were manageable, maybe 50 or 60 pounds. My day got worse with the first of two big picture windows. “Could use a little help here...” The driver grunted, got down off the truck, grabbed one of the two picture windows, balanced and hoisted it onto his shoulder, carried it to the job site by himself, leaving me to haul the next one. Not quite the help I had in mind.

On another job I would have stood my ground. On another job it wouldn’t be necessary to ask. On this job I was on my own, in a truck 50 kilometres from home with a driver who didn’t care. I centred the weight of the window on my shoulder, grabbed it at the bottom, got it to where it needed to be. Didn’t drop it. Wouldn’t want to give the prick the satisfaction.

The driver never said a word to me, did not acknowledge my existence. I settled into the routine of a long day, watching the scenery of Southern Vancouver Island roll by, listened to the driver’s monosyllabic phone conversations with his wife, endless Howard Stern on satellite radio punctuated by loops of American Idol finalist Chris Daughtry’s overwrought



Sandbar Art 4 Sale Highway 19A Series by Susy Johnsen
Watercolour with pen and ink on 130lb cold pressed cotton rag
paper
10x8 in

lost-at-love rock ballads. I didn't bother asking for help again.

In Victoria we off-loaded at a lumber retailer where the crew knew the driver's habits. They arrived with wheeled dollies and gave lots of help, smirking at the Howard Stern blaring from the truck cab. Finally, after more deliveries to building sites on the trip north, we got back to Nanaimo. It was early evening. I was beat and my back ached. The next day I told Mike that if Rudy couldn't make the window run another time, I wouldn't be taking the job. "Oh yeah," said Mike. "The driver, that Daughtry guy... What an asshole."

During our jobs together I had lots of time to talk to Rudy, but he remained a mystery. He was clearly capable, had a solid work ethic and, from what I gathered over time, had held some technical qualifications, maybe as an electrician or another skilled trade. Yet he now lived a hand-to-mouth existence in cheap suite, with no car, no savings, doing day labour. He didn't appear to have a grocery budget but instead showed up for work every day with a bagged lunch provided by the free breakfast place where he said he volunteered every morning before showing up at the labour place at 6 a.m. I would have doubted anyone else telling me the volunteering story, but Rudy never gave me reason to think he was less-than-forthright, so I believed him.

There were hints of something tragic in the past, a plane

crash and buddies up the coast, but Rudy was always upbeat, even tempered, never bitched. He was, I suppose, a drunk, and spent the balance of his wages beyond very basic needs on beer. But he never showed any evidence of alcoholism beyond requests I drop him off to cash his cheque so he could buy today's twelve pack.

Donnie was a different story. Where Rudy could look a little rough around the edges, and provided little personal detail, Donnie was always neatly, if not nattily, groomed and talked about his past way beyond the limit of too much information. One of the urban legends circulating around town was that, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics of 2010, Gordon Campbell's government had given the city's undesirables wads of cash and bus tickets for places like Victoria and Nanaimo. The urban legend around the labour place was that Donnie was one of those bus passengers.

Donnie had done jail time. He spoke in self-aggrandizing monologues about running cocaine for a motorcycle gang, driving a muscle car, bulking up on anabolic steroids and engaging in degrading sex in exchange for coke in the bathrooms of bars. "You should have seen me, all 'roided up. I was big then! The girls loved me!"

He had a drug habit; I never knew what kind. Rudy would say "Donnie's on the pipe," but that could mean lots of things.

Whatever it was, it showed up in his work day. Donnie could be productive, in a manic kind of way, for about four hours in the morning, although he had a bad habit of telling everyone else how to do their work. After noon he'd start getting squirrely and, if a job lasted beyond mid-afternoon, he entered into uselessness, wandering around the job site, hands flapping, complaining about everything he thought was slowing work down, and moaning about needing to go home and 'feed his cat.'

Rudy, normally tolerant of his co-workers, vilified Donnie, calling him a "little thief" and telling me, "I hate that fucking little criminal." I kept a close eye on my valuables when Donnie was around.

Donnie, of course, had no car, so I gave him rides to a bunch of jobs. I got sick of him pretty quickly, with his lurid jail, drug, and sex talk, and his habit of telling me how to drive. I'd be waiting for a break at an intersection and he'd be saying "Go! Go! Go! Stomp on it! Drive! Drive!" Riders were expected to contribute a small amount, five bucks or so, for gas but Donnie would always find a way to weasel out. I was at the point of telling Mike I needed money up front or Donnie was going to have to find another ride, when circumstances intervened.

Donnie and I had done the siding warehouse job a few

times. This involved helping the warehouse workers offload long cardboard boxes of aluminum and vinyl siding from truck trailers and stack them for storage. It was physical work, lots of carrying and walking, but the weights weren't excessive, we got decent breaks, and the warehouse crew were a good-natured bunch. Plus, as Donnie never ceased pointing out, we got extra pay if we offloaded quickly, usually an extra hour on the three or four we worked. Until the last time.

Some glitch I can't remember slowed the unloading down — maybe the truck was extra full or one of the regular crew called off sick. In any case, we worked up to noon and then past it. Donnie got twitchy, twitchiness graduating to cursing and muttering under his breath about being “screwed out of an hour,” graduating into swearing at the foreman and demanding to see the boss who was Donnie's “close personal friend.”

The foreman glared at Donnie, looked at me, asked “Is that the way they all are at the labour place?”

“Not me,” I answered. “I'm always polite.” And that was the last time I saw Donnie, who was no longer wanted at the siding warehouse.

I worked there just once more, this time with a kid about 20 years old. He had greasy black mid-length hair, wore a leather jacket and tattered fashion jeans. He had a profoundly bad tattoo on his face, an orange and red flame that came up from

his neck and curled around to his cheek. It looked like it had been done with marker pens by a third-grader. The kid's story was that he had been a world-class longboarder, had done skateboarding meets in South America. He liked Nanaimo because it has lots of long, smoothly paved hills, although one of those hills was nearly his undoing. He was riding fast in the middle of night when he blew through a stop sign, T-boning a car and breaking many bones. As sure a candidate for a Darwin award as I have ever met.

While we were working some of the stitches, or safety pins, or whatever, holding his jeans together let loose, an L-shaped tear revealing a bone-white buttock. A ghastly sight. During breaks the kid would spend long minutes in the men's room, inhaling medicinal marijuana through a mask-like device. It stank, sweet and skunky. The foreman wrinkled his nose, gave me another look like the one when Donnie lost his shit, turned up his hands in the universal gesture of "What-in-the-fuck?" Once again I shrugged, "I only give them rides here."

Pretty soon after that I found myself no longer needing to do day labour. The gardening business had picked up nicely and I'd started to get off-season work, doing landscape construction projects for customers willing to wait for my slow time. During the winter rains, and occasional snows, I was happy to stay home and rest, never thinking again about day

labour.

I ran into Rudy just once afterwards. I was driving on Bruce Street through Harewood when I saw him at the sidewalk at a bus stop. He recognized my truck and waved me over. Rudy looked indestructible as ever. Still smoking hand-rolled cigarettes. He had quit day labour, was living with a girlfriend in a suite, working steady days at the recycling centre.

He told me a story that made him happy. Donnie, for reasons unknown, got it into his head to target Jason. One morning at the labour place Jason was walking past Donnie, who was seated. Donnie stuck his foot out and tripped him. Jason, six-foot and fit from his regular gig with a landscaping company, recovered quickly, grabbed Donnie by his jacket, threw him to the floor, sat on his chest, and pummelled him. “Bam, bam, bam!” said Rudy, pantomiming short, hard shots.

Jason let go of Donnie’s jacket, got up off his chest, walked over to Mike behind the counter. A little sheepish. Said, “I guess I need to find a new place to work, huh?” Mike shook his head, grinned tight-lipped. “Don’t worry about it. He had it coming.”

That was in the early days of Covid, which seems a long time ago now. Once in a while I would drive past the day labour place and think about masking up and dropping in. I stopped myself with the imagined awkward conversation.

“Are you looking for work?”

“Um, no. Just soaking up the atmosphere.”

And then it was gone. Closed. Replaced by the offices of a not-for-profit I had never heard of. I had an odd feeling of loss, as though a portal to another realm had been boarded up and nailed shut. Where would Nanaimo’s poor and desperate go for work now? What had become of Rudy, Mike, Jason, Donnie? What about the longboard kid with the face tat? Which of them had pushed through? Who would have succumbed to their demons? We all have our demons.

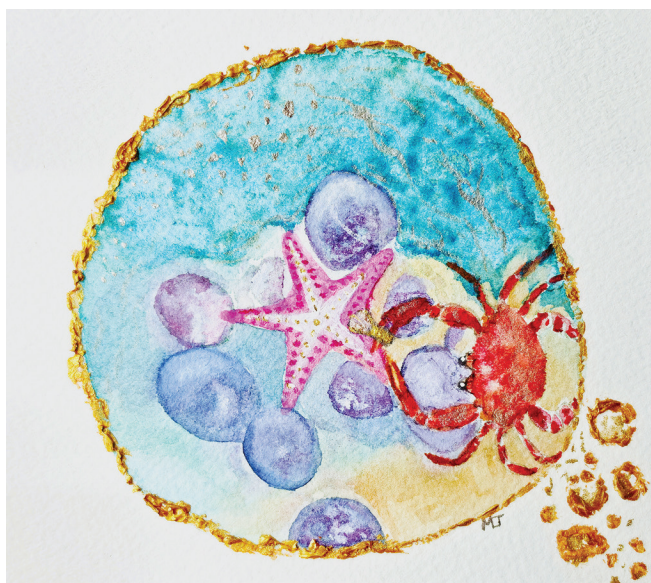
I tell myself a story that my friend Rudy is okay, that he has his recycling job, that he’s tough as nails, a survivor. I hope so. I wish them all well. Even Donnie.

Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect privacy.



Things N Stuff Highway 19A Series by Susy Johnsen
Watercolour with pen and ink on 130lb cold pressed cotton rag paper
10x8 in





Will You Marry Me? by Miriam Jakal

Watercolour, acrylic on watercolour paper

4.5 x in

The Light in the Shower

Richel A. Donaldson

The sunrise kissed the mountains on the eastern edge of the inlet while fog pooled across the still waters of a slack tide. Light had yet to reach the marina when she clicked the lock in the door of the tiny coffee shop, worn painted planks imbued with the scent of coffee beans on one side and speckled with barnacles on the other. Her fingers confidently strode over light switches and tore open bags of fresh beans, preparing for the rush of villagers and tourists eager to catch the fish that rose with the morning tide. She breathed deep into the small cup of coffee she allowed herself to have each morning, the rich aroma blending with the clear tang of salt that saturated the cool morning air.

Natalie served the regular faces one after the other, filling corporate branded thermoses and handing out the occasional muffin wrapped in plastic. Smiling nods and sleepy eyes met her cheerful greetings, grease-stained hoodies and salt encrusted boots shuffled in and out of the tiny coffee shed.

Few words were exchanged — but Natalie savoured the quiet, knowing that fresh bites and the ocean breeze would bring an endless stream of chatter when the boats returned later in the day.

After the majority of the marina had emptied, Natalie set about wiping surfaces and washing utensils, emptying used coffee grinds into small paper bags for the gardeners in the community to bury amongst their fresh soil. As the sun hung lazily above the sharp mountains, Natalie's older sister shuffled into the coffee shed with an equal amount of reluctance.

Cameron sat heavily on the single stool and dramatically draped her upper body across the narrow counter until her fingers reached towards her sister, bunching fistfuls of apron as she groaned.

"I don't want to," Cameron whined, "everyone sucks and for some reason I have to deal with it." She ground the heels of her hands into her eyes.

"You always say that," Natalie offered her a mocking pat on the shoulder.

"This time I mean it." Cameron raised her face up to meet Natalie's, dark brown eyes locking together underneath similarly dark brown hair. Natalie had braided hers in the wee hours of the morning; Cameron's was tucked haphazardly behind her ears.

“The delivery truck is late, so I won’t have any eggs for brunch. I have three new teenagers,” — Cameron shuddered — “to train, Andrew is sick, and there’s another charter of Germans arriving this afternoon.” Cameron dropped her forehead back down to the counter, moaning as she pulled at her hair.

Natalie sighed and pulled an elastic from her wrist, offering it to Cameron with a patronizing smile. “The truck will be here soon. Those three teenagers are our cousins so you should start being nice to them. You think Andrew is too slow and you always kick him off the line anyways.” Natalie sucked in a breath, hands on her hips. “And the last charter of Germans that came in had two dudes on it that you thought were so hot I had to hear about it for weeks.” Natalie gave her sister a gentle smack on the top of her head. “Stop whining and open the damn restaurant.”

Cameron huffed out a long breath and glared at Natalie as she tied up her long, tangled hair. Almost as if summoned by Natalie’s disdain, the delivery truck honked from the top of the ramp that descended down into the marina.

Her sister rolled her eyes, “Can you meet the truck? I’ll open.”

Cameron stomped towards the restaurant adjacent to the coffee shed while Natalie scooted herself around the edge

of the counter. She heard men arguing as they unloaded the truck, and more men arguing behind her on their boats as she took hurried steps across the metal grating of the gangplank.

One of the men arguing at the truck raised his chin in greeting to her while accepting a large crate in his arms from the other man. “Hey, Nat,” he huffed, “sorry we’re late. Chris doesn’t know where the gas pedal is.”

Chris dragged his own crate to the edge of the truck, hopping down and hauling it into his arms. “No, Jacob doesn’t know that it shouldn’t take forty minutes to do his stupid hair in the morning!”

Jacob winked as Natalie grabbed a crate of her own, shaking her head and biting back a smile. The three of them did several trips into the restaurant, bringing in crates of eggs and milk, steak and chicken breast, hamburger buns and pre-cut home fries.

On her fourth trip up the gangway, a bead of sweat dripped down Natalie’s face, and someone called out her name. The voice was too loud and pressed into her ear, as if the speaker was standing at her shoulder. She started and whirled, expecting to chastise someone about her personal space but being greeted by empty air. Her heart pounding in her ears and skin on fire she turned to continue her way up to the shore and walked face first into Jacob and a crate of iceberg lettuce. Her

breath was forced out of her lungs; she failed to grasp the arm rail of the ramp before she was sent spinning over it into the black water below.

The rush of air and chill of water sent her heart into a frenzy. She could hear blood roaring in her ears as her fingers desperately reached in every direction trying to intuit a way back to the light. Her jeans and boots immediately turned into waterlogged weights slowing her movement as she desperately fought every instinct and forced her eyelids open.

A face?

Hands pressed to the sides of her cheeks the moment her eyes flew open. No, not hands, fins? Bright green human eyes stared at her from harbour seal cheeks, stiff whiskers stuck out above pouty feminine lips. Curls of long black hair swirled in front of her eyes as sharp claws dug into her cheeks, fatty sealskin arms holding her in place.

Natalie screamed. Nothing but bubbles came out.

“Would you shut up, you’ll run out of air.” The voice rang clear and cold in her head, as if a tiny bell made out of ice was clanging in her ear drum.

She screamed louder.

The creature threw its head back in frustration clamping a hand over Natalie’s mouth. “There, isn’t that better?” it asked, and Natalie’s horrified eyes were the only no she had to give.

The creature stuck its face closer to Natalie, her nose filling with the oozy tang of rotting fish. “We don’t have much time,” it whispered, revealing a mouthful of serrated teeth.

“I’ve watched your mother’s line, and I’ve watched you come of age,” it hissed quickly. “Your mother wasn’t ready, and your grandmother certainly wasn’t, but you” — its hand tightened around Natalie’s jaw, and she could feel her skin tearing under its claws — “I think you could do it.”

Natalie’s mind was tearing at the seams, confusion and horror commingling like a nest of hornets. *How do you know who I am?* she would have cried if the fleshy fat of its seal-skin palm did not fill her mouth. Natalie thrashed her limbs, fingers grasping uselessly at the cold water that surrounded her. Her lungs screamed as they used up the final dregs of air, her eyes bulging out of her head desperately trying to communicate her impending demise to the apathetic creature.

“I know, calm down,” it said, and mercifully released Natalie’s mouth, placing both hands around the edges of her face. To Natalie’s overwhelming shock, it brought its mouth to hers, blowing bubbles of air into her lungs. Relief was quickly eclipsed with renewed panic as the creature continued speaking. “We will have much to discuss, but for now, know this — the ocean will not rest any longer.” Its eyes narrowed: “For too long we have let you humans get away with stealing our fish,

filling our water with your dreadful machines and dark slop.
No longer.”

It shifted its hands along Natalie’s face, seeming to cradle her cheeks. “Your people once stood alongside ours. You have been lost for generations now, suffering. But we can see the light of the ocean burning once more in your hearts.” Natalie’s fingers reached up to grab the creature’s arms, with slightly less panic but a growing sense of urgency as the gifted bubble of air faded from her lungs.

The creature felt the squeeze of Natalie’s hands and intuited her meaning. “I am going to give you a gift,” it clasped Natalie’s left hand between its own, using a sharp claw to make a mark in the centre of her palm. Drops of blood dissolved into the saltwater as the creature’s mark curled in intricate swirls across the flesh of her hand. When it was finished, the creature reached back to Natalie’s face: “Meet me at the caves on the southeast side of the inlet at dusk in four days.” With no warning, the creature roughly seized Natalie’s waist and tossed her upwards, sending her screaming towards the surface.



“Is she breathing?”

“Let me see!”

“How was she under for so long?”

“Get help!”

Voices rang above her as Natalie slowly blinked her eyes open; Jacob and Chris's horrified faces slowly swirled into focus along with several confused teenagers. The hard boards of the dock pressed into her soaked skin and her head throbbed from the loud voices and bright sunlight.

"She's awake!" one voice yelled. "Where the hell is Cameron?"

As if summoned into existence by her name, Cameron was suddenly by her sister's side, clinging to her face and calling her name. Multiple hands slowly sat Natalie upright and wrapped her in blankets. "I'm alright," she whispered.

"I'm going to take you home, Grandma will have a look at you," Cameron said softly to Natalie. She stood, like an angry bear protecting her cub, and proceeded to yell at the teenagers that quickly scurried across the marina. "Don't you morons ruin my restaurant. I'll be back in an hour."

Jacob and Chris helped Natalie to stand and supported her up the gangway, their arms holding softly to her exhausted limbs. Cameron followed closely behind, giving Jacob a reproachful look and a shove on the shoulder when he tried to apologize. After Natalie was gently placed into the passenger seat of Cameron's Tracker, they drove in silence up the short dirt road to the lane of doublewides perched on a ridge above the marina. The furthest trailer was occupied by the sisters,

their dad, and grandmother.

Natalie and Cameron's grandma was petite but had the sturdy build that only a lifetime of pulling nets and gutting fish will get you. She stood in front of their door, hands on her hips and grey hair in a single braid down her back. Her dark eyes echoed her granddaughters and were filled with barely contained panic.

"Duncan called up, said you were on your way," their grandma said, rushing to support Natalie out of the Tracker. "What the hell happened?"

"Jacob walloped her with a crate," spat Cameron. Natalie winced.

"No," she whispered, "I got in the way."

Cameron exchanged a glance with her grandma before escorting Natalie inside where they were greeted with a burst of warm air from the wood burning fire in the corner of the small living room.

Cameron rushed to get dry clothes while their grandma stripped Natalie of her soaked shirt and jeans. Grandma slowly examined Natalie, feeling along her limbs for injuries and listening to her lungs for any retained water. There were no doctors in their village, but many of the Elders had been around the water long enough that they had an intimate understanding of drowning. Satisfied, Grandma allowed

Cameron to dress her sister in sweatpants and a hoodie before sinking her slowly into the pile of crochet blankets on the small floral couch. While Cameron busied herself with making a pot of overly strong tea, their grandma slowly felt along the back of Natalie's head, making tutting noises and she felt a lump protruding behind her right ear. She made Natalie follow her finger with her eyes and say a few simple sentences before patting her lovingly on the cheek.

"You are very lucky my dear," she concluded, "Doesn't even look like you're concussed. A bit of tea and a rest should sort you right out."

"Grandma," Natalie started, eyes wide, "there was something in the water." Her Grandma looked unbothered and gave her the same soft smile she did when Natalie was three and liked to pretend to find faeries in the trees. "Let's have some tea, and then you can close your eyes." Natalie was too tired to resist, her eyes closed heavily as she sunk into a purple and yellow blanket.



When Natalie woke, her sister was gone and the fire in the corner was burnt down to softly flickering embers. Her grandma sat in a recliner opposite her, observing her with keen dark eyes. Natalie rose slowly, gingerly touching the lump throbbing behind her ear. "He really clocked me," she said with

a slow smile.

Her grandma's eyes gleamed, repeating her earlier refrain. "You are very lucky my dear. It is fortunate you were far out enough that you didn't land on the rocks."

Natalie took a slow breath in, steadying herself. She took a long moment to look at her grandma, the thin wrinkles in the corners of her eyes crinkling with concern. Natalie dug her nails into the heels of her hands and braced herself for her grandma's reaction when she shared what she saw under the dark ripples of the marina.

"Grandma..." she licked dry lips, "there was a creature in the water. Almost human. But like a seal too." She stopped, staring at her grandma in anticipation.

Grandma sighed. "My dear, you've had quite a shock. Maybe you saw a fish!"

Natalie's eyes narrowed. "It talked to me! It talked about you, how it was watching our line, it made a mark –" she stopped abruptly, looking down at her clean palm, the swirling marks that the creature had left with its claw completely absent.

Her grandma rose from her recliner, kneeling in front of Natalie and placing a hand on her cheek in an eerie imitation of where the creature had placed its hand only hours before.





Ships Point Highway 19A Series by Susy Johnsen
Watercolour with pen and ink on 130lb cold pressed cotton rag paper
10x8 in



When Natalie woke, her sister was gone and the fire in the corner was burnt down to softly flickering embers. Her grandma sat in a recliner opposite her, observing her with

“We’ll take you into the city in the morning my dear, I do think you’ve had a bit of a hit on the head.” She patted her cheek, “in the meantime, why don’t you take a quick shower and rinse the salt out of your hair.”

She stood to leave her granddaughter, taking several steps towards the kitchen. She stopped at the doorway and turned hesitantly. “Don’t say any of this around town, dear. People will talk.”

Grandma hurriedly left the room and left Natalie struggling under the weight of being silenced.



The old shower roared to life, aggressively spitting steaming hot water into the tub. Natalie cautiously stripped the sweatpants from her legs and pulled the hoodie over her head, her fingers unsure as her mind tried to stitch together the creature’s words. Doubt was creeping at the corners of her thoughts – maybe her grandma was right, maybe she had hit her head too hard.

Stepping into the shower, Natalie gasped as the hot water ran down her back and through her tangled hair. She closed her eyes and let the water slow her heart rate and ease her muscles.

After an age, she blinked her eyes open, looking down at her feet and the water pooling around her toes. She shrieked.

Where there should have been clear water collecting on the bottom of the tub there was shimmering light. The water around her feet was opalescent, shining vibrantly. She quickly picked up her toes as if she was hopping on hot coals. Her hands grasped the tiles of the shower, and she shrieked again as she noticed the same opalescent light was leaking from the water that beaded on her hands.

A sharp knock came from the door as her grandma called out, “You alright dear?”

Natalie heard her grandma’s earlier dismissal in her head as she looked at the drops of white light on her hand. “Sorry grandma, uh... spider!” she called.

Her grandma’s footsteps retreated. Natalie took a deep breath to steel herself as she looked down her body, examining the trails of light left by the water hitting her skin. She tentatively touched the water, observing how a graze of her fingers turned the plain liquid into brilliant light. Turning over her hand, she took a sharp inhale as the same light seeped through the cracks of her palm in the spiral patterns of the creature’s mark.



The next four days crept by as if Natalie were viewing

the hours through a hazy window. Her grandma took her to a doctor in the city, who gave her a clean bill of health. She opened the shop, served coffee, and closed it. The only indication that her world had shifted on its axis were the thin black gloves she wore, terrified that her skin might touch water and betray her. Her body went through the motions of her days while her mind was trapped below the water with the creature and the light in the shower. On the fourth day, the minutes ticked by at an agonizing pace. Her heart thrummed in her chest as the sun began to descend towards the west.

Armed with her hiking boots, a fleece quarter-zip, and black baseball cap, she carefully made a path through the slick rocks on the southeast side of the inlet. Crabs darted underneath her feet as she disturbed rocks, barnacles crunching with each tenacious step. The last tendrils of evening light guided her way towards small caves set into the glistening shoreline, revealed by the waning tide.

She felt as if though she were breathing through a snorkel flooded with water; no matter how deep she drew her breath she felt as if she were gasping and lightheaded. Her fingers shook inside her gloves, but she did her best to keep her face calm as she locked eyes with the seal-human creature lounging on the wet sand inside the cave.

It was much smaller than she thought it would be. It had

the plump, stout frame of a well-fed harbour seal — yet fatty arms with claws emerged where its fins should have been, and a graceful neck supported dainty, feminine facial features and flowing black hair. When it spoke, its voice rang out clear and cold but seemed to come from the ocean instead of its mouth.

“I’m glad you’ve come.” It looked Natalie up and down. “I assumed you wouldn’t.”

Natalie gulped. “I have too many questions.”

The creature’s lips curled into what might have been a smile, but it was hard to know for sure underneath its whiskers.

“Name them,” it responded, leaning slightly back onto the rocks.

“Wha— I mean, who are you?”

“I’ve had many names. Those who only see a part of me call me üüla, or a seal. Those who fear myself and my siblings call us hak’wilo’ox.” It narrowed its eyes. “Sea monster.” It reclined even further: “But you will come to respect me so you may call me by my name: Likswaas.” It flicked a small rock with a claw. “Or in your foreigner’s tongue, a change in the wind.”

Natalie’s pulse quickened. “How do you know our language?”

Its brows furrowed. “Child, we are of the same water. The ocean that you sail on, the river that you pull fish from, the blood that runs through your veins and mine. It is all the same

language.”

“My siblings and I used to walk amongst you,” Likswaas continued. “We are of the spirit and the human, the natural and the supernatural. We used to work so well together, conquering the seasons and feeding the earth.”

Its eyes darkened. “But things changed. Your people suffered greatly, and we went into hiding. We still exist in your stories, but you have been forced to forget that we are your family members.”

Natalie slowly dropped to the ground, finding a seat amongst the rocks. Her mind was struggling to piece together what Likswaas was saying with what she knew to be true, remembering stories of animals that transformed into humans and back again. She remembered stories of her ancestors becoming orcas when they passed on, carrying on matriarchal lines beneath the waves. She locked eyes with the creature and the sincerity in its eyes unlocked a steady conviction in her heard.

“Why me?” she asked.

A sparkle lit in the Likswaas’s eyes. “Child, you are so precious. I have been watching your family for generations, and you are the seventh daughter alight with the dreams of your ancestors.” It sat forward, reaching towards Natalie and pulling off one of her gloves. It slowly dragged the tips of its

fingers across the swirling marks, wetting them with saltwater and bringing the shining white light to life.

Likswaas cradled her palm between its clawed hands: “This is you. I have only awakened it.” Not taking its eyes off of Natalie’s hand, Likswaas gently placed it into the ocean water lapping on the rocks.

Natalie gasped. A wide circle of radiance blossomed underwater, and bubbles began to form at the surface. She could see tiny fish swimming towards the light and inhaled sharply as they nibbled the tips of her fingers. Likswaas laughed and withdrew her hand from the water, the light fading as quickly as it had emerged.

They both blinked slowly at each other, Likswaas with a quiet excitement and Natalie with a great sense of awe. Finally, Natalie withdrew her hand and brought it to her chest, pressing it into her heart.

“What does this mean?” she whispered.

Likswaas let out a long exhale. “It means you have a choice to make, child. You can ignore who you are, and I will heal your hand and sink back into the sea, and you will never hear from me again.” It paused, letting the implications settle on Natalie. Her brow creased as she contemplated leaving behind this glorious light that she had just discovered.

“Or,” Likswaas continued, the light back in its eyes, “you can

come with me. You can help me wake my siblings, rally your people, and fight back against the blackness that plagues our waters.” It leaned closer. “You can be everything our peoples need you to be.”

Natalie’s head spun. It was too much, too much knowledge, too much responsibility. But she couldn’t possibly give it up. It would be so much easier not knowing this. Maybe her life wasn’t meant to be easy.

Their eyes locked onto one another, warm dark brown and glimmering green. Natalie squared her shoulders and set her jaw before giving Likswaas one firm nod.

“Yes. Show me how.”

Likswaas seized Natalie’s shoulders and squeezed them with glee.

“Let’s wake them up.”



I Am Not Hungry by Miriam Jakal
Watercolour on watercolour paper
4.5x4 in

Instead of False or Lost Let Hope Be This

Kelsey Ewart

Maybe hope is a bird like Emily Dickinson wrote
And if it is, let it be an eagle
Who can ride thermals higher than the rest
And let it be an owl, too
Who can hear scissors plotting to clip its wings
Invisible watchers of the hunter setting futile traps

Maybe hope grows in the earth
And if it does, let it be a dandelion
Spreading like the weed it is
No matter it's been cut or poisoned
And when its bloom comes to an end
Let small and mighty hands send wishes in the wind
Let it land in new places and root seeds where the soil needs it

Maybe hope is a sunrise ray of light
And if it is, let it warm our faces and will us awake
Because even if it's fleeting
If a gust of thunder crawls across its shine
And in the dark we ache of loss
Nothing can stop us from imagining
Nestled closed together on a couch with a view
Feeling that orange and pink glow of a new day

Maybe hope is a hand writing these words
And if it is, let it form shapes that reach out and push us
Up with the birds and seeds suspended in daybreak

Above finger-pointing, grabbing hands
Let it craft an idea filed in a cabinet we never lock
Or scratch a message into a hard place
Always to find and never to lose or debate as untrue
The thing that perches under our ribs
And whispers to our hearts the will to keep beating

My Favourite Room in the House

Kelsey Ewart

There are rooms for sitting and replaying what was
On stiff backed chairs my ancestors fretted in before me
Shelves that fall after a while because they were never done right
A hutch covered with trinkets I can't let go of

There are rooms for hunger
To stand in front of un-stocked cupboards consuming without intention
Where used, crusty utensils pile up
And ideas of baking something fresh turn cold and stale or moldy

There are rooms for transforming
To scrub away that which makes me ill
A dresser overflowing with garments I want to wear but never do

Rooms for comfort...all pillows and down blankets to drift away on
Rooms for screens...to fill my thoughts with someone else's stories

But there is a room I am renovating now
A dusty old room I bound around in when I was young
A room sure to be my favourite
Refurbished with moments I wish to never leave

Like walking the Cowichan Valley Trail late summer, late afternoon
The trail my son calls the neigh neigh trail
(for the horses who say hello when we pass)

The walls will be painted a pale gold of dried foliage
And wainscoting a white sunlight that stretches through trees
There will be plush, dark umber couches ordained with
Bright purple thistle and tiny white yarrow flowers
Paintings to depict the blackberry juice framing my son's smile
And soft cream of the dandelion pappus he wishes away

Arched windows will cast lines of light with time's slow pass
Smelling of warm hay, wind and the spice atop my son's head
The hum of crickets' music will play until dark
An open book always waiting on a maple burl coffee table

In this room, I will read stories about the ordinary events of today
Like the wild joy in my son's eyes
At the start of a belly laugh
Or a bite of whole strawberry cupped in his tiny hand
Running from the sharks he forces us to be after dinner
Or when our dog brings him toys looking for a chase
Sparks that light me up, mere seconds of magic

I will go here to read and relive and let the sparks catch
And find myself again



Clamdiggers Arbutus Bay Highway 19A Series by Susy Johnsen
Watercolour with pen and ink on 130lb cold pressed cotton rag paper
10x8 in



Still Together

Seana Kozar

Down in their roots,
Where the Earth heals
And the deeps sing tiny last thoughts back into the promise of life,
All trees dream of flying.

Some spend their lives denying,
Shaking their heads to the beckoning winds,
Crossing their arms in defiance
(To the delight of nesting birds!)

Curmudgeonly conifers and disgruntled deciduous united,
Pushing their roots ever deeper
Creaking their hollow oaths against temptation.

“And they’ve got it all wrong,” the Arbutus hums to herself.

Stretching scandalously bare arms to the strengthening spring sun,
Madrona laughs and waves to no one in particular
And waits for her flighty swain to return.
A flash of suspended flame in the sky,
Her tiny braggart, in all his swaggering, furious stillness
Surveying the shore to see who might be worthy of his homecoming.

“Hello, sweetness,” the little charmer winks,
Settling into her wild leafy tresses,
Heavy with rag-curls of blossom,
He drinks.

“Oceans wide I swam for you,” he spins the old tale.
“None of that!” she shudders.
“Tell me truly where you made the winter flee.”
“Mexico,” he sighs, “I disappear, the colours there
Are so like me.”

He tells her of his travels til the stars
Dance flamenco before her eyes
To fall exhausted into the rosy morning sea.
And so spring to summer passes.

Time surrounds them in suspended flight,
Passing in a slow shiver until one morning,

Pretending to sleep and feeling the drought in her roots
The blight spotting the leaves she hides
Like an old woman's hands, she hears him whisper:

"I heard a rumour of crows
Carrying off a pear tree to vex a farmer.
I'd take you with me south to please you, if I could."
She imagines an incandescence of flight over an infinity of ocean,
And blesses him in silent farewell.

He returns in the spring and she nurses his children,
Consoles his windswept wife with stories of the wild, wee bachelor
While he fights with the robins and thrushes and waxwings—and wins,
Because nectar is only fit for the gods.

And so it was every spring, until she stretched and waved and waited
And was still. Solitary.
And then she knew flight of a kind
A final dreaming — falling into the sea.
Which alone had returned, at last, for her.

She sent the last strength of her centre
Deep into the earth for the trees around her,
Who had disapproved mightily of her flighty ways
And the colourful company she kept.

Taking her strength, they dream of flying.

Unfurling branches like wings, flexing roots like talons
They send strength back to where the earth remembers her,
And hope sprouts green and strong but never straight.

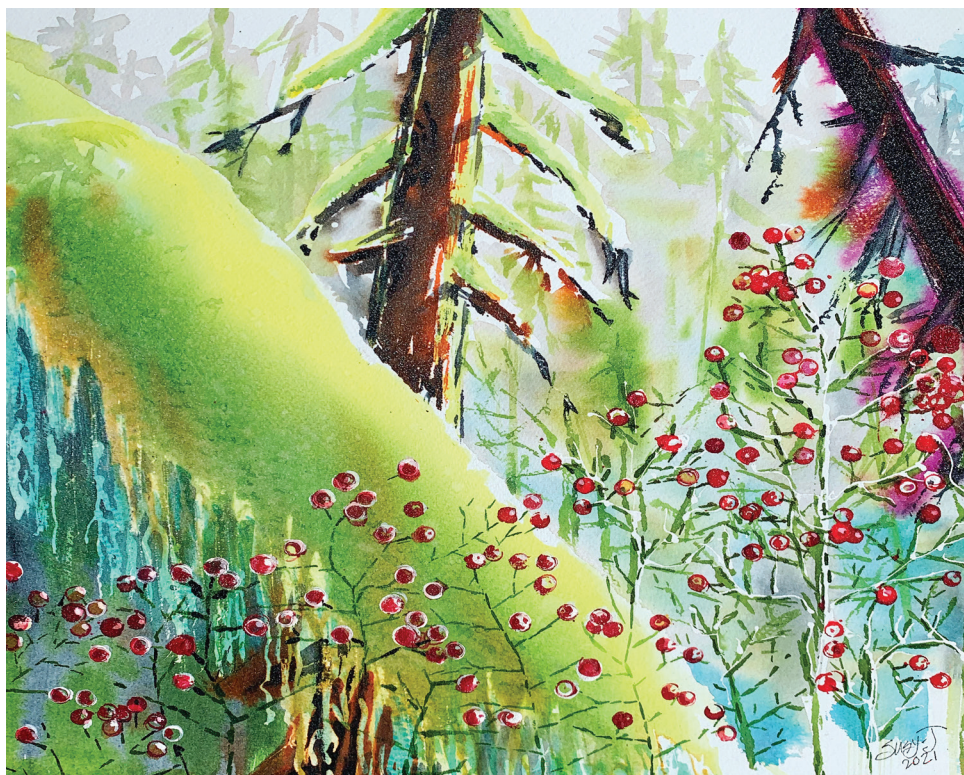
Stretching wild bare arms toward the new spring sun,
A young Madrona spies the scarlet pilgrim and tosses her head,
“Do you like tales of far away?
A drink for the best you’ve ever heard,” he pledges,
She laughs softly and they are still.
Together.

Stones

Riley Vardy

Stories are like stones
That I hold in my mouth
Collect in my pockets
Sit low in my belly
On my windowsill I collect
Jars of spiders, teeth,
Butterfly wings and wishbones
Dried chillies, pennies
In the late afternoon
I sit sometimes,
Made golden by the sun,
I drink lemon balm tea and
Trace my fingertips over these stones
Warm and smooth some,
From the sun and sea and years,
The heft, the displacement,
Like boulders,
Some light and thin and skip-skipping
Over the flat of the cove
I remember her powdery wrinkles,
Laughing loud through missing teeth,
I remember the land,
Packed, hard earth that my bare feet flew over
Leaping in and out of the creek
Swinging from the Willow like her branches were
A rope,
I remember other things that swing from trees
And other things that sink

I turn my face to the glowing, the setting
Turn and flip my cup,
In the leaves I see
Wings, minnows,
Bone, crow,
Oar



Miracle Beach Huckleberries by Susy Johnsen

Watercolour with pen and ink on 130lb cold pressed cotton rag
paper

10x8 in

Searing Melody

Erin Zinsky

F*ire at the pulp mill!*

It said on the community Facebook group, where gossip and posts about dogs and sheep at large are as plentiful as potholes in spring.

Fire at the pulp mill!

Not 5 km from my house. One way in and one way out. Down a winding, narrow country road, bordered by lambs, apples and soggy leaves.

Fire at the pulp mill!

On a windy day. Gusting near 60km per hour, the wind pushed branches and waves aside, uninterested in any “Hi, how are yous.”

My husband Jory and I sat in our car in the grocery store parking lot. The sun was blazing. Unimpeded by meaningful clouds, it greedily sucked the last of the spring rains from the parched ground. I stared at the phone screen, transfixed by those four words floating in a pink and purple ombre box.

Why choose pink and purple? It looked like one of those cute posts I sometimes saw announcing a lemonade stand at the

corner of the ballpark. “\$2 a glass! Come support the kiddos!”

Fire at the pulp mill!

“What are you reading?” Jory asked. He didn’t really like it when I stared at the device, ignoring him.

I read it aloud — the words materializing in the car. They floated heavily in the too-humid air. Despite the heat, a wave of ice washed through my chest, and my eyes darted towards home. Yes, there it was — a tell-tale plume of smoke rising in the distance. Not quite grey, not quite yellow. More like wall-paper paste.

He stared. “What do you mean, fire at the pulp mill?”

The words continued floating there. Large, multicoloured helium balloons, they filled the passenger compartment, pushing me aside. I was forced to lean into the window, my face pressed against the glass, uncomfortably warm in the blazing heat of the day. Angrily shoving them into the back seat, I scrolled further down the screen to read the comments, searching for more details.

“Fire in the hog pile,” one user said. “What’s a hog pile?” *Is it like a dog pile? A hotdog pile?* I could see the pork running in all directions, trying to get away from the flames.

“I think they mean hog fuel pile,” Jory said. “That’s like the waste wood they burn for heat, isn’t it?”

I didn’t know. My dad had worked at the pulp mill for 35

years, and you would have thought I'd learned a thing or two growing up.

"Turn on the car. I'm dying in here and we need to get home." I could feel the fear expanding in my chest. Inflating like those balloons that now refused to deflate in the back seat. Jory started the car, and a blast of cool air escaped from the vents. Instantly I felt a chill, the beads of sweat on my brow quivering under its intensity. It did nothing to reduce the burning fear simmering within.

Cars and streetlights soon disappeared, replaced by rolling hills dotted with black and white. The road narrowed, and freed from the pressures of maximum efficiency, began to loosen its straight edge to follow the gentle curves of the countryside. The car bounced and jostled over rough roads patched with countless attempts to overcome erosion. I was suddenly aware of our speed, reduced as we navigated the one rural artery connecting our house to the city.

Twisting and turning, the road tied itself in knots. The kind that take time and patience to unwind. There was nothing direct about it. *One way in and one way out.* The pavement wound and spooled itself on my lap; a carelessly gathered bundle. I felt it constricting my hands. Wrapping around them until I could barely wiggle my fingers. Frantically, I shook them free and loop by loop awkwardly threw it on top of the

balloons behind me.

The smoke from the fire loomed above us. As we drove into it, the colour shifted to orange. Soot and ash mixed with grey, and a burnt umber hue emerged on the palette. We pressed on, through the ribbon of smoke streaming south-east, blown by the wind. Emerging on the other side, we began the descent into our neighbourhood. The road tumbled towards the coast. *One way in and one way out.*

I looked around as we slid down the incline towards the boat ramp at the bottom. Trails of smoke swirled fitfully across the road, playfully skipping in front of the tires as though teasing a child on a swing set. The impish gleam in the eyes of the smoke creatures sparkled as they darted in and out, disappearing for a moment in the bushes before emerging again.

“The boat ramp!” I said suddenly, my words punctuating the sticky silence that filled the car. Jory glanced over at me.

“What does that mean?”

“There’s another way out. We have kayaks. We can launch them from the boat ramp if we need to.”

“I’m sure it won’t come to that,” he said vaguely. From his tone, I could tell he was paying little attention to the objects accumulating in the back seat, nor the little imps dancing between the wheels.

The wind began to pick up, and the silvery imps swirled into

the air. They began to holler, a sound both shrill and deep that sent reverberations through the neighbourhood. I could smell it again. That acrid danger and fear, the stench trailing behind the smoke creatures.

Gravity pulled us down. Faster and faster, trees and shrubs whizzed by the windows and the little smoke devils leaped out of the way, no longer giggling and smirking. Faster and faster. My thoughts sped up with the tires. Round and round, spinning and careening like a top. Down, down, down. Until, suddenly, we stopped.

I glanced around, dizzy and disoriented, my mind a gyroscope, slow to respond to the sudden change in velocity. We were home. Our house nestled perfectly in a hidden crook within the forest's embrace. It looked the same, yet different. The normally bright green a sickly hue in the orange-tinted light.

"We only have 20 minutes to get ready," Jory said, as he climbed out of the car.

"Ready for what?"

"The symphony at Harry and Linda's house. I want to get a good seat this time. Last year we couldn't see the musicians. The show starts at six but there were already people parking and lining up with their lawn chairs."

I shook my head. I hadn't even noticed. I had completely

forgotten about it. The symphony in the garden, a relic of Covid-times.

“There was nothing on Facebook about it. How was I supposed to remember?” Then again, unless there was a sheep loose in the middle of the performance, the wider community was unlikely to take notice. Grimacing, I climbed out of the car and turned towards the house. Something tugged at my foot. I looked down and saw a yellow snake of rope wrapped around my ankle. I kicked my foot a few times trying to shake myself free, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Hurry up. We still have to get changed.”

Giving up, I went inside, the rope scurrying behind me. *One way in and one way out.*

Jory quickly put away the groceries and disappeared into the bedroom, searching for something to wear no doubt. Starting down the hall, I felt the gentle tug of the rope at my feet, urging me towards the basement. There were boxes in the crawl space.

“Hurry up, there’s no time,” Jory said, his words muffled through the bedroom door.

“Hurry up, there’s no time,” urged the rope.

I turned and found myself gliding down the basement stairs. My mind sped up again. A well-oiled machine, with years of practice, it went into overdrive. Grabbing three boxes, I was

already 10 steps ahead. *Baby photos. Wedding photos. Grandma's jewellery. Birth certificates. Wedding certificate. Yearbooks. Journals. Family cookbooks. Hard drives. Computer. Handmade quilts. Paintings. Postcards. Souvenirs.*

I couldn't take a breath. Thoughts and images frantically tumbled over one another as I bounced from room to room, filling boxes with memories and artifacts. *Certificates. Pet urn. Copy of our will. Childhood stuffies. Baby blankets.*

As I moved through the house, I felt the rope tangle and weave a thick mat beneath my feet. It felt strangely familiar, but slowed my steps as I was forced to wade through the uneven fabric.

Jory emerged from the bedroom wearing a button-up shirt over tan slacks — perfect for a garden symphony. He walked down the hall, stepping over the folds of matted rope as though he couldn't see them.

"Hurry up, there's not enough time for that," he snapped.

"Just help me pack these three boxes. I don't know what you want in them."

"Fine but go get dressed."

Reluctantly, I turned my back on the growing pile of mementos in the foyer and went into the bedroom, pulling the rope behind me. *What can I wear?* I flipped through the closet. My mind, continued to churn, nowhere near the dresses

before me. *Socks. Underwear. Bras. PJs. Pants. Shirts. Toothbrush. Toothpaste. Shampoo...*

“Hurry up. There’s no more time!” Jory’s words echoed down the hall.

Looking down, I saw a pile of clothes on the bed. Survival clothes. Things you would need for a week. Or two. Or more, if we had to leave. Forcing myself to ignore them for a moment, I picked a dress out of the closet. Pink flowers. A sleeveless summer frock. I would blend in with the surroundings. Finally dressed, I picked up the pile of clothes and headed towards the front door.

“Where did you put the boxes?”

“In the car. I thought it would make you feel better. Anyway, I guess there’s no harm in being prepared.”

I threw the clothes in an empty box and bent down to loosen the rope that suddenly felt tighter.

“Let’s go.” He stepped out the door. “Bring a jacket or something. It might be cooler by the ocean.”

Looking around, something shiny caught my eye. Jory must have cleared out the back seat of the car when he loaded the boxes in. *Balloons. Perfect, something fancy to wear to the performance.* I draped them around my shoulders, but they slipped off a little. Instinctively, I reached down and grabbed a loop of rope, tying it over the balloons like a sash. Stepping out

the door, the acrid smell of soot and dust made me wince.

“Hurry up!” Jory exclaimed, yet again. Reluctantly, I followed behind him. He seemed calm, but his shoulders stiffened with irritation as he carried the lawn chairs down the driveway.

“You go ahead,” I said, gesturing towards the venue. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“What are you doing?”

“I have to set up the sprinklers.”

He sighed, shrugging as he walked away. Stepping into the lawn, I could feel the pull of the rope as it dragged in the grass. The sprinkler stood in the middle, strategically placed to reach the vegetable garden and the cherry trees. But that’s not what I wanted to save. Visions of towering flames and embers raining down on the roof of the house filled my mind. The outline of the remains of trees left a blue-grey smudge on the backdrop of an orange horizon.

“Dammit, my textbooks are in the car. I can’t remember all the formulas,” I muttered to myself desperately. *I only have one shot at it, it has to be perfect.* Reaching down, I tugged at the cord of rope tangled in the grass and began to wave it up and down. It undulated. A sound wave rippled across the yard. Watching its pattern, my mind raced.

The cosign of a quadrilateral triangle is linear to its tangent.

Parabolas and graphs sprung out of the lawn, launched into the air by the pulsating rope. I swung it harder, wider, its arc teasing formulas and mathematical constants out of the grass. Pinning each one as if on a blackboard, I attempted to calculate the curve of the water at maximum velocity.

I heard a small giggle, barely audible over the sound of the rope slapping the ground. Then another. Two wispy figures danced across the lawn and gleefully began skipping over the swinging rope.

“Go away!”

The smoke imps laughed and continued jumping. Each time they left the ground, a misty trail rose in the air, obscuring my view. I squinted my eyes; only a few numbers were still visible. It was no use. My memory of trigonometry was as faded as the equations disappearing in the smoke. Dropping the rope, I relocated the sprinkler, forced to use my best guess.

Turning to look at the house one last time before heading to the concert, a spot of red caught my eye. *The kayaks. I'd better bring them with me.* Fixing a loop of rope to the bow of each one, I began dragging them down the driveway and out onto the road. *It's only 500 meters away. I can run back in less than 4 minutes and jump in the car if I have to. Wallet. Purse. Medication. Passports. Credit cards.* The words appeared in my mind, finding their way onto the invisible list with each step as

I walked towards our neighbours' house.

"Hello!" a cheery voice rang out. Linda waved. "Such a lovely day, isn't it? I'm so glad you could come."

Jory stood next to her with the lawn chairs. He squinted at the kayaks but didn't say anything. Hugging my arms around my stomach, I pulled the balloons in closer. An inner chill combatting the baking heat of the day gripped me.

Linda beamed. "That's such a beautiful dress. The roses are blooming in the garden. You'll look lovely next to them." She chuckled. "And your shawl will keep the birds away from what's left of the cherries. It's very pretty. Where did you get it?"

I gaped at her, unsure what to say.

"Here's your program. Sign yourselves in at the table, then bring your chairs around back and join the crowd. I think there are still a few good spots left."

"Is there a coat check? Where can I put my kayaks?"

"Yes, over there. Just to the left of the gate."

Jory grabbed the program and proceeded to follow her directions as I left the kayaks with the coat check attendants, clutching the little plastic token they handed me in my fist.

I could feel the reluctance growing with every step. *This isn't right. I don't have time for this.*

We stepped through the gate and looked around. It was a

beautiful venue. A west-coast modern house on a bluff overlooking the ocean below. Bordered on two sides by tufts of ornamental grass, bunches of daisies and a rose trellis, the bluff edge was rimmed by a line of towering cedars and Douglas firs. The green lawn in the middle was bustling with activity. Scattered rows of lawn chairs of every shape and colour dotted the space haphazardly, though there were a few empty spaces remaining.

Jory sighed with frustration. "Where do you want to sit?"

Near the gate at the back, I thought to myself. But I knew he wanted to be closer so he could see. I swallowed hard. "There, in the third row. Between the lady with the red hat and the man wearing the tan jacket."

We jostled through the crowd and sat down.

"Hi, how are you? Such a lovely day isn't it?" I turned to see who was speaking and recognized one of our neighbours, Trent.

"Not a cloud in the sky. Perfect weather!" he crooned.

I swallowed a mouthful of fear. "I'm fine. The weather's a little dry. I would be happy for some rain to put out the fire."

"What fire?"

I looked sharply at him, incredulous.

"The one at the pulp mill," I said, gesturing toward the sky and the towering column of smoke glaring down at us through

a circle bordered by trees.

“Oh, right. That will be out soon.”

“Oh, have you seen an update? I couldn’t find anything.” I leaned forward, hoping for good news.

“No, I only looked at it once. But I’m sure things will work out. They always do.”

“I’m a little worried about it. There’s only one wa—”

I stopped mid-sentence. Trent had turned away, waving happily at another neighbour across the lawn. “Hi! How are you? Such a lovely day, isn’t it?”

The crowd swelled around us as time marched on. It was nearing the start of the performance. Neighbourly greetings and the sound of lawn chairs groaning filled the air as their occupants sat down with a thump. I pulled out my phone and opened Facebook, desperate for any updates. *It’s been two hours since the first post, surely there’s news.* Scrolling past post after post, I looked for the pink and purple box that had initially caught my eye.

Food truc at the school from 8am to 7pm

Lose sheep across from the ball diamond

Chicken and duck eggs for sale \$6 a dozen

Far down at the bottom of the screen, I found it, already an outdated relic of the day. 10 comments. I clicked on it, my heart beating wildly, afraid of what I would see.



His Royal Nappiness by Miriam Jakal

Watercolour, ink, gold leaf on watercolour paper

6x4 in

“Where?”

“At the pulp mill don’t you know how to read?”

“Is that what all the sirens were about?”

“I hope the city firefighters are there. The community volunteers won’t know what they’re doing.”

“How did it start does anyone know?”

“I heard it was self combustion. Serves them right for polluting the ocean.”

“Those are high paying jobs that’s what brings money into the community you’re so ungrateful.”

“Any status updates?”

The last comment was over an hour ago. Nothing. No useful information. Just the sort of quips that are easy to write when hiding behind a screen.

Jory glance down at my lap. “Just relax. No news is good news,” he reassured me.

Refresh. Refresh. Refresh. I pulled the screen down to reload it over and over, hoping something new would appear. The same cheerful, bubble gum background greeted me each time. Closing the app out of frustration, I clenched my teeth. *Maybe the news will have something. An official statement perhaps.* Nothing. There was no news. It was Saturday night; the news cycle wouldn’t start again until Monday. *Ugh. What about BC wildfire services?*

There. On the map, a tiny orange flame danced on the screen. Clicking on it, I read the last update, posted two hours ago. “Out of control. 1 hectare. Next update at 8am”.

Out of control? What does that mean? How large is a hectare? I don't even know how big that is. 8am. That's more than 12 hours from now. How will I know what's going on? I felt disoriented as I looked at the map, thoughts piling up on top of each other. The little flame beamed at me from the screen, its eyes twinkling mischievously as though it knew a secret that it refused to reveal.

“Ahem. Ahem. Ladies and gentlemen. The show is about to start! Please turn your devices off or put them in airplane mode so they don't interrupt the performance.”

I obeyed, mechanically, the familiar movements hiding a deep fear beneath. That tenuous link to the possibility of information suddenly went black.

Brass instruments shone in the afternoon sun. Fingers slid effortlessly up and down strings as the music began. The bass player cradled his instrument and swayed — two lovers moving to the beat. *Jory will be happy, at least he can see the musicians this time.* I glanced at him out the corner of my eye. He smiled.

The first song ended, and a soft applause rose into the air, blending with the chatter of birds flitting to and fro between

the cedars and grass. The trumpet player rose from his seat and walked to the front of the patio that had become a stage.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Who here recognized Rhapsody number 2 by Franz Liszt...” A knowing murmur rumbled through the crowd, and several people raised their hands.

“Liszt grew up in...” The musician’s voice droned on, but I stopped paying attention. A hint of movement in the ornamental grass had caught my eye. *That’s not a bird.* I looked closer. A faint wisp of grey disappeared near the base of the plant. It emerged again, peering out like a shy child hiding in the folds of its mother’s dress. Rising slightly into the air, it startled and dove back down as the trumpet suddenly rang out.

I gulped. *The smoke imps!* Cautiously, they began emerging from the safety of the grass, momentary alarm turning to curiosity. A few at first. Then, as the music built, more and more emerged.

Alarmed, I looked around at the crowd, expecting to see shocked faces, but each gaze was locked on the musicians. Feet tapped and heads nodded in appreciation. The smoke imps rolled and tumbled in the lawn, some doing summersaults while others cartwheeled between rows of chairs. A game of tag ensued among the bunches of lavender. My nose curled

at the acrid smell gently wafting towards me. The wind had momentarily quieted as the heat of the afternoon began to subside. I could see calm waves on the water below. A light breeze rustled through the garden.

The hour dragged on. Song after song, each one introduced by a member of the orchestra. A personal anecdote and some mundane piece of musical history. Applause, followed by another song. I felt a sense of urgency building in my chest. Lists and possibilities played on repeat in my mind.

What's happening with the fire? I needed to check for updates. Sneaking my hand into my purse, I glanced at the man to my left. Nodding in time with the music, he frowned a little. His eyes narrowed, frown lines deepening as I tightened the grip on my phone and pulled. My hand was stuck. The corner of his mouth pulled down as I tugged on my phone. It was glued to the bottom of my purse. Reluctantly, my fingers released their hold and fell back into my lap. The man smiled, sun glinting on his teeth.

The smoke imps kept dancing. The music kept playing. I looked around, wishing I had a clear view towards the west, but the view was blocked by the house and the hill beyond. The afternoon light began to fade. The woman across from me lowered her hand, no longer needing to shade her eyes from the sun peaking around the corner.

Her face! My heart skipped a beat. A sickly orange pall bathed one side of her body; the other was hidden in shadow. I shifted in my chair, pulling at the rope, still twisted around my ankles. It refused to budge.

Please let this be the last one, I pleaded silently, as the next song was introduced. The bassist stopped talking and turned back towards his seat. He raised his hand dramatically and then... paused. The audience held its breath. Reaching down, he delicately stroked his lover's neck, and a single, deep note cut through the thick air. The audience, as one, exhaled.

Boom. Boom. Boom. The deep sound reverberated. I could feel the wind picking up. The last hurrah of the afternoon.

Boom. Boom. Boom. The other musicians played, their sounds increasingly drowned out by the heavy rhythm of the bass.

Boom. Boom. Boom. Faster and faster. The tempo increased. Boom. Boom. The wind began rustling the music sheets. They flapped, a flock of baby birds learning how to fly.

Boom. Boom. Boom. The sound lifted into the air, filling the space with a tremendous force. I tensed, my whole body yearning to flee. The crowd surrounding me clapped in unison. All eyes were transfixed on the bass player, his fingers flying as he plucked the strings.

Boom. Boom. Boom. Hair began to stand on end, whipped

up by the stiff wind. The trombone player reached out to catch his music as it lifted from the stand and began to fly away. The melody began to hesitate and falter. Notes soured. Music sheets swirled in the vortex.

Faster and faster, the bass strings rang until they were nearly indistinguishable. A steady wall of sound pounded the air. All around me, looks of rapture beamed on the faces of the audience, engulfed in the wash of rhythm pouring from the bass. They worshipped it, unaware of the chaos surrounding them. The thumping of my heart nearly reached a peak.

Suddenly, it hit me. *A helicopter!* I looked up at the circular patch of sky. A rotor sliced the air above us, greedily sucking in air and shoving it down. I could see a massive bucket dangling from it by a rope, poised to empty its load. *Why are they so close?* I gasped breathlessly, the words pulled from my lungs by the furious winds.

The smoke imps, no longer small, ran around the yard, encircling us as they grew with the sudden influx of oxygen. Their feet tripped and snagged on the end of rope I had inadvertently dragged onto the lawn and forgotten to spool at my side. I felt it pull tighter. Each circuit by the imps wound it like a spool around the crowd. It pulled in, closer and closer.

“One way in and one way out. One way in and one way out.” A chant emanated from the crowd. Their voices rose in a

crescendo as the orange hue thickened and began to flicker.

I opened my mouth and began to scream. “Fire! We have to leave!”

“One way in and one way out” the crowd sang.

“Fire!” I pleaded.

“One way in and one way out!” they echoed.

Boom. Boom. Boom. My heart beat wildly in my chest. I could feel the suffocating heat of the flames on my face as I stood up and desperately searched for the token so I could collect my kayaks and escape.

Suddenly, the crowd leaped up around me. Turning, I expected them to follow. But they stayed still. Transfixed.

A pause. A final beat. Then, silence.

Suddenly, a cheer erupted from the crowd. I looked around in astonishment as the wind slowed and died down as quickly as it had risen. The light shifted back towards blue. I stood there, gasping, as the crowd clapped, and the musicians bowed. A standing ovation.

Shivering from a sudden chill and the aftereffects of adrenaline, I clutched at the rope encircling my shoulders. After a while, the applause died down and the concert master stepped forward.

“Thank you! Thank you! You have been the most wonderful audience! Your participation was the most we’ve seen yet on

this tour!”

It was over. Lawn chairs snapped shut and the crowd shuffled out, murmuring its approval. After a few minutes, only Jory and I remained.

“Let’s go home. I’m sure you have more packing to do.”

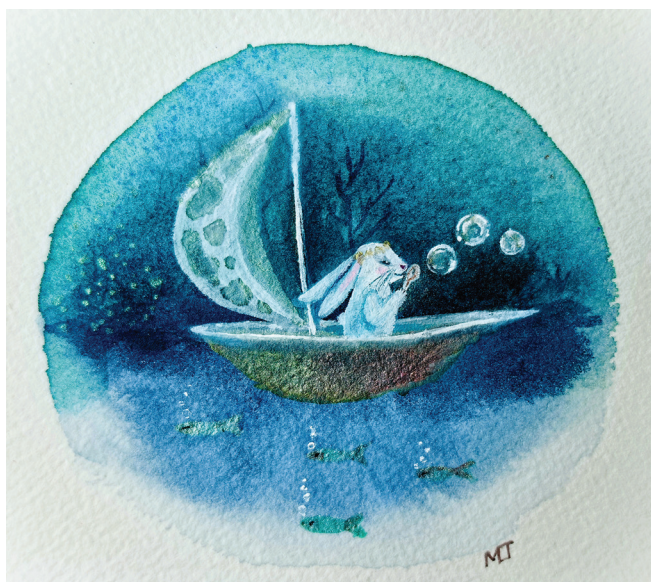
As we walked out the gate, Harry, the host, handed us a small bouquet. It was a bunch of lavender, tied with an end of yellow string.

“Here’s a little gift. Thank you so much for coming! I hope you can join us for the next performance,” he beamed.

Half-heartedly mumbling my appreciation, I turned towards home. As we walked down the driveway, I looked down at the flowers in my hand. My heart skipped a beat. They were sooty and grey.



Wildflowers on a Pedestal by Susy Johnsen
Watercolour with pen and ink on 130lb cold pressed cotton
rag paper
10x8 in



Bubbles by Miriam Jakal

Watercolour, ink on watercolour paper

4.5x4 in

Contributors

CAMILLA ARNOLD (she/her) is a writer located on the Snuneymuxw territories of Vancouver Island. She is fascinated by the intersections between community and individual well-being, and the surrounding ecosystems which nourish her. Camilla obtained her Master of Arts degree in Literature from UVic and has publications in both the Spring 2024 edition of *Sea and Cedar* magazine and *Folklife* magazine.

BAILEY BELLOSILLO is a queer writer, artist, and photographer. She is currently working as the Arts & Culture Editor with *The Navigator* and an Art Director with *Portal Magazine*. Her non-fiction piece “Safety in Strangers” was published in the 2025 edition of *Portal Magazine*; Bellosillo’s digital artwork “To Hold” additionally served as the cover.

KAREN CHARLESON (she/her) is a lifelong resident of the VIRL area. She is the author of the novel *Through Different Eyes*. Her poems have been included in the anthologies *Worth More Standing* and *Sweetwater*. Karen is a member through marriage of the Hesquiaht First Nation and House of Kin-quashtakumtlth.

IAN COGNITŌ (he/him) is a poet author from Yellowpoint, BC. He was the founder of 15 Minutes of Infamy, a Nanaimo-based word-craft cabaret, and is the publisher of Repartee Press. Ian has written or co-written seven poetry collections including *Animalian* (2024) and *Play on Worlds* (June 2025). He has also co-edited two anthologies through Repartee Press, with a third one, *Eyes Wild Open*, newly released and

ready for readers. For more information: www.reparteeepress.com.

RICHEL A. DONALDSON (she/her/hers) is an emerging writer living in Campbell River with her husband, son, and herd of pets. She is Tsimshian from the Kitsumkalum First Nation, Scottish and English. She is inspired by women's resistance and has found creative writing as an expression of decolonial hope.

Born and raised on Vancouver Island, **KELSEY EWART** (she/her) has been fortunate to live in many beautiful places along the Salish Sea. She currently lives on Cowichan Tribes territory and is a content designer for work. She's been writing creatively since childhood and is inspired by the people she loves, nature, and ordinary moments of daily life.

JANNINE GRANT holds a BA in Creative Writing and English from Vancouver Island University (2021). Her publications include: poetry chapbook *Fantasy Island* published in VIUSpace; script *Ministry* in *Portal 2020* magazine. Individual published poems are on her [wordpress site](#). Winning collaborative projects include: "Springtime in the Anthropocene" & Wordstorm Society's On the fifth season out at Old Mill.

MIRIAM JAKAL is a multidisciplinary artist and musician whose creativity has been a lifelong pursuit. She trained in performing arts, singing opera on stages around Europe, before exploring a wide range of visual arts, including water-colour, paper engineering, acrylics, and silk painting. After becoming a mother, she shifted her focus to visual art and music education, drawing inspiration from her experiences living

in the Arctic and later on north Vancouver Island. Her work, often incorporating natural materials, seeks to capture the rhythms, textures, and humour of life. Miriam's art celebrates the unpredictable and lively spirit of both nature and human experience.

SUSY JOHNSEN (nee Hansen), although born in Denmark, is an island gal. At the ripe age of 3 months she convinced her parents to emigrate directly to Campbell River where, as early as primary school, she discovered she loved art. Her art education began in high school where she won a bursary from the Campbell River Arts Council which led to KSA Art College. Her college portfolio led her to graphic design which segued into a career in advertising. Intense years of deadline-driven agency work led her to realize she was spending her time doing everything but art. When she retired from her career she moved back to the island to explore watercolours. She now lives in Bowser where the local sights of this quaint seaside town have become the inspiration for her art.

SEANA KOZAR is an artist and animator who loves storytelling by hand in all its forms. She lives in Nanaimo with her husband and two very charismatic cats. When she isn't making art, she can be found making clothes for her daughter who is studying ballet in Toronto.

JANIS LA COUVÉE (she/her) is a writer and poet with a love of wild green spaces, dedicated to conservation efforts in Campbell River, Canada — home since time immemorial to the Liḡw̓łdaḡw̓ people. She is an alumna of the inaugural Fahmidan Literary Journal mentorship. Her work has been

featured in *Splendour of Wings* (League of Canadian Poets chapbook), New York Writers Coalition's *Common Unity*, and the New Feather Anthology. Words in *Loch Raven Review*, *Home Planet News*, *Griffel*, *Stickman Review*, *Feral Poetry*, *Humana Obscura*, among others. Online: janislacouvee.com @lacouvee on X, Mastodon and Bluesky, @janislacouveeonline on Instagram and Facebook.

DANIAL NEIL is the author of *Dominion of Mercy* (NeWest Press 2021), *The Sum of One Man's Pleasure* (NeWest Press 2023) and *Song of the Sea Wolf*, which is scheduled for publication in 2028 by Guernica Editions. In addition to having his novels celebrated for their wonderfully crafted characters and lyrical prose, he was a contributor to the poetry anthology *Worth More Standing* published by Caitlin Press in 2022. Danial lives in Nanaimo.

SHEENA ROBINSON (she/her) is an urban member of the Haílzaqv (Heiltsuk) First Nation with mixed settler ancestry. Her writing can be found in various anthologies and magazines including *Portal*, *Incline*, *In Our Own Aboriginal Voice* 2, *Worth More Standing*, and *The Kindread Coast*. Sheena gratefully resides as a guest on Snuneymuxw territory (Nanaimo) where she works in Indigenous philanthropy.

MICHAEL PENNY was born in Australia, but his family moved him to Canada when he was young. Since then he has published five books and in numerous literary periodicals. He now lives on Bowen Island, and, once upon a time, was a lawyer.

RILEY VARDY (they/them) is a poet and musician living in the gulf islands. They can be found floating in the lake, baking blackberry pies or loving on their cats.

NORMAN WAGENAAR is a writer, gardener and musician. He lives in Nanaimo.

ERIN ZINSKY (she/her) is an emerging writer and artist grateful to call Vancouver Island home. She recently won an award for a poem in a regional contest.

SEA & CEDAR

LITERATURE & ART MAGAZINE

IN THIS ISSUE

Camilla Arnold
Bailey Bellosillo
Karen Charleson
Ian Cognitō
Richel A. Donaldson
Kelsey Ewart
Jannine Grant
Miriam Jakal
Susy Johnsen

Seana Kozar
Janis La Cuvée
Danial Neil
Michael Penny
Sheena Robinson
Riley Vardy
Norman Wagenaar
Erin Zinsky



VANCOUVER ISLAND REGIONAL LIBRARY

www.virl.bc.ca/sea-cedar-magazine