



2023 Winning Stories



**Les histoires
gagnantes de 2023**

The logo features the text 'SPEAKER'S' in a large, bold, yellow sans-serif font, with 'AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS' in a smaller, white, bold, sans-serif font below it. The background is a dark, stylized illustration of three arched doorways or windows, rendered in a light grey or white color, set against a black background.

SPEAKER'S AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS

ABOUT THE AWARD

The Speaker's Award for Youth Writers was launched in 2015 to celebrate the writing talents of Ontario's youth.

Each year, students in grades 7-12 are invited to submit their short stories and personal essays to this writing contest. Original fiction and non-fiction submissions are welcome and a winner from each grade category is chosen.

SELECTION COMMITTEE

Erin Budra holds a Masters of Arts in European Studies from the University of Guelph. She currently serves as the Communications and Exhibits Officer at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

Franco Gutierrez is a graduate of the Masters of Teaching at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. He currently serves as the Page Program Coordinator at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

Nina Zemko is the Manager of Strategic Communications and Education Services at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. In this role, she oversees all education programming and resources, communications, and special programs like the Speaker's Book Award.

Debi LaMantia is the Director of Parliamentary Protocol and Public Relations Branch at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario and oversees public relations activities such as education and visitor services, outreach and public engagement, and strategic communications. Her role also includes the coordination of protocol at the Legislature, ensuring that activities such as parliamentary associations, special events and ceremonies, and programs for the receiving of delegations and special visitors to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario are managed effectively. The Legislative Gift Shop, Legislative Page Program and the Student Usher Program are also under her direction.



PRIX DU PRÉSIDENT POUR LES JEUNES ÉCRIVAINS

À PROPOS DU PRIX

Le Prix du président pour les jeunes écrivaines et écrivains a été lancé en 2015 pour célébrer les talents d'écriture des jeunes de l'Ontario.

Chaque année, les élèves de la 7e à la 12e année sont invités à soumettre leurs nouvelles et leurs essais personnels dans le cadre de ce concours d'écriture. Les soumissions originales de fiction et de non-fiction sont acceptées et un gagnant de chaque catégorie scolaire est choisi.

COMITÉ DE SÉLECTION

Erin Budra est titulaire d'une maîtrise en études européennes de l'université de Guelph. Elle est actuellement chargée de la communication et des expositions à l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario.

Franco Gutierrez a obtenu sa maîtrise en éducation de l'Institut d'études pédagogiques de l'Ontario à l'Université de Toronto. Il est actuellement coordonnateur du Programme des pages à l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario.

Nina Zemko est le chef des communications stratégiques et des services éducatifs à l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario. À ce titre, elle supervise l'ensemble des programmes et des ressources pédagogiques, les communications et les programmes spéciaux tels que le Prix du livre du président.

Debi LaMantia est directrice de la Direction du protocole parlementaire et des relations publiques à l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario. Elle supervise les activités de relations publiques telles que l'éducation et les services aux visiteurs, l'extension communautaire et l'engagement du public, ainsi que les communications stratégiques. Son rôle consiste également à coordonner le protocole à l'Assemblée législative, telles que les associations parlementaires, les événements spéciaux et les cérémonies, ainsi que les programmes d'accueil des délégations et des visiteurs spéciaux à l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario. La boutique, le Programme des pages de l'Assemblée législative et le Programme des huissiers sont également sous sa direction.



SPEAKER'S **AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS**

2023 SPEAKER'S AWARD FOR YOUTH WRITERS

Grades 7-8

WINNER

Lenora Danby - *Tugs on the Bus*

HONOURABLE MENTION

Noah Box - *Dance with the Devil*

Grades 9-10

WINNER

Tristyn Birkenbergs - *The Mountain We Used to Call Home*

HONOURABLE MENTION

Sophie Corkum - *Thoughts of a Waiting Man*

Grades 11-12

WINNER

Victoria Zalewski - *Spilled Milk*

HONOURABLE MENTION

Amel Amrouche - *Moi, diagramme de vaine*



PRIX DU
PRÉSIDENT
POUR LES JEUNES ÉCRIVAINS

2023 PRIX DU PRÉSIDENT POUR LES JEUNES ÉCRIVAINS

7^e - 8^e années

GAGNANT

Lenora Danby - *Tugs on the Bus*

MENTION HONORABLE

Noah Box - *Dance with the Devil*

9^e - 10^e années

GAGNANT

Tristyn Birkenbergs - *The Mountain We Used to Call Home*

MENTION HONORABLE

Sophie Corkum - *Thoughts of a Waiting Man*

11^e - 12^e années

GAGNANT

Victoria Zalewski - *Spilled Milk*

MENTION HONORABLE

Amel Amrouche - *Moi, diagramme de vaine*

WINNER/GAGNANT (GRADES 7-8/7^E - 8^E ANNÉES)

Lenora Danby - *Tugs on the Bus*

It all started on a typical Monday morning. The birds were chirping, the sun was shining, and there was no way I could stay asleep. The birds were rather obnoxious at 7:00 in the morning, cawing their faces off. Blue jays screeched, chickadees chickadeed, and robins cooed, and if the birds are up, I'm up. I wouldn't be surprised if my mom recruited them to wake me up, because goodness knows, I'm hard to get out of bed. The sun made sure I was awake, but I ignored it and pulled the covers up over my chin. I was tired. The sun was streaming down through my window, and was hitting me square in the face. When it hits you in the eyes, good luck staying in bed. Yeah, my window shades had been down when I went to bed, but my mom opened them again this morning as a futile attempt to wake me up. The thing that finally got me out of bed was my dog, Tugs. He click-clacked down the hallway, with his long, unkempt nails, and he decided he would lay down in front of my door. Now, when he lays down, he's not getting up for anything, a little like me. The difference between me and him, though, is that he's 150 pounds of fat and muscle, and nothing can move him. I, on the other hand, I'm 80 pounds, and if my mom really wanted to, she could lift me out of bed like a sack of potatoes. Sure enough, he laid down with an almighty "THUD". Well, I didn't feel like being trapped in my room all day, so I rolled out of bed, grabbed my housecoat off the hook on my wall, wrapped it around myself and went over to my door. I tried opening it. Sure enough, Tugs was lying in front of it, but it opened smoothly, and that's when I remembered that my door was a pull door. You may think I should have known this already, and I felt quite foolish for forgetting, but it was early and I was groggy. We all have our moments.

I meandered into the kitchen and fixed myself a bowl of cereal, and my mom comes walking out of her bedroom, dressed in khaki cargo pants, a mahogany tee shirt that read F.G.C.A, Forest Gene Conservation Association, and socks, with her hair pulled up in a high pony, as usual. I don't know how my mom does it, getting up so early. I sure can't. "Well good morning, sleepy head!" She said, a little too cheerfully for having woken up at 6:30. "Morning." I replied. I watched her get her work stuff together, and I finished off my bowl of cereal. I put the spoon in the sink, and rinsed out my bowl, and once I was done I got dressed in real clothes. Today I chose a shirt that read "make today AMAZING!". It was my favourite. It was a hand me down, as most of my clothes are, but it was soft and light, and it was still in pretty good shape considering it had been owned by people before me. I picked out some white jean capris, which are, again, my favorite although I spilled some paint on them a couple of months ago. I chose a random sweater and some mismatched socks, and I made some snacks for my brother and me.

My brother, Ethan, comes out of his room fully dressed, and I pour him some cereal. He mumbles his thanks, and I pack my bag. Now that I have finished the morning routine, I read to kill some time. Now, if you don't know me, I could read for hours. My vision of a perfect day is me, with a good novel, in one of our armchairs with a cup of hot chocolate. When I read, it's like everything else is shut out. The hum of the vacuum, my mom singing some song she heard on the radio, none of it exists to me. For all I care, I am in that book, a character who just stands aside and watches. I don't know how long I was reading for, but it must have been a while, because mom snapped me out of my reading trance by saying "Get your shoes on! We have to catch the bus!" And with that, I leapt from my chair, put the book down carefully, saving my page, went over to the door and jammed my shoes on my feet. My shoes were high tops, with pink leopard spots. On top of the spots were stars and stripes and polka dots. They were a jumble of patterning, and they were kind of chaotic and messy, like my personality way back when.

My brother wheels up beside me, and he shoves a red Raptors hat on his head. I grab my Blue Jays ball cap, and we race out the door. Now, my mom would often bring Tugs along with us to the bus stop, because she would take him on his walk after she sent us on the bus, so she would always take an extra minute to get him ready as well. He's an old dog, who would get cuts on his tender feet, and he would lick and lick and lick, to the point where they would be five times bigger than they were originally. He got infections, and they seldom

went away. My mom, bless her patient heart, would put soothing cream on his feet so it would hurt less, wrap his infected feet in gauze, tape it so it would stay on, put on a dog bootie, velcro that on, and on top of all that, she would put a plastic bag over the bootie, so that it was waterproof. All that took about six or seven minutes, depending on how Tugs was feeling that day. Sometimes he was uncooperative, and he would growl and bear his teeth. On those days, it took extra long, edging towards ten minutes. Today was one of the good days, and it was quick. Mom put him on a leash, helped my brother down the ramp on our porch, and we were off.

We don't live in town, in fact, quite the contrary. Our house is in the middle of the woods, atop a hill in the middle of nowhere. Our driveway is not the typical driveway, as you could imagine. It's a steep hillock, and at the top is where our house is. On either side of the driveway are ditches, about 20 feet tall at the deep parts, and around eight at the lowest parts. In our ditches is a space that is leveled off, with trees and bushes growing in them, and creeks running through. I had always enjoyed playing in those ditches, although it is always very buggy due to the creeks. Back to the point. Our driveway is hard to get up and down, especially for my brother, who is in a wheelchair. He would go on a wheelchair bus, and I would go on the regular bus. My bus came before his, but we would wait together, with our mom and Tugs, of course.

Mom tied Tugs' leash to a small tree, and right about then, my bus pulled up. Tugs went crazy. I don't know why he did, but he acted as if he was a puppy again, jumping around and barking his deep melody. I hugged my mum goodbye, and I walked up to the bus, bracing myself for loud kids, bad smells and a long ride. I got on to the bus and walked to my seat. It was empty, as usual, and I plopped my bag down. That's when I realized it. There were smells, but no noise. Everybody on the bus was in silent awe. I looked around, and Tugs wasn't where mom had tied him. I hear barking, and I see a fuzzy golden head pop up beside the driver's seat. Tugs! He had pulled on his leash so hard that the knot came loose, and he had run up the stairs on the bus after me! To me, Tugs isn't that intimidating, but to others, the big, loud German shepherd mutt must have been pretty nerve-wracking. I ran back to the front of the bus, where mom was trying to pull Tugs off the bus, but to no avail. When I got to the front, I pushed Tugs down the stairs, while mom was working on the other side, pulling. She couldn't do it on her own, but with me helping, the flailing hulk of a dog was taken out of the bus. The kids on the bus were now howling with laughter. I found the whole affair quite funny, but I was mightily embarrassed as well, and the embarrassment outweighed the funny by one hundred fold. The bus was full of big kids, me being a little kid in grade two, and the laughs of the older kids did not help my embarrassment. I walked, head down, back to my seat, and, with my face red, I pulled my hood up and waved goodbye to my mom. She, like the other kids, was laughing. We always had this joke where we would make the funniest wave we could. My favorite way to wave was the Star Trek alien way, with two fingers on each side of my hand together, and my doubled up fingers would go together and apart. It took some coordination, but after a while, I had perfected it. Today, I did not feel like joking around. My silly, old, grumpy dog had wrecked my day. Some of the kids on my bus were in my class. What if they told the other kids? What if they thought Tugs was dangerous? The loud, stinging laughter did not die down. Not when we left my driveway, not when we got to the next stop, and not when we pulled into the school.

I was walking off the bus, and I passed the driver. I apologized for the Tugs incident, and he said it was okay, but I could see the laughter in his eyes. I bitterly walked down the steps, and I neared my portable, where we were to line up. Usually, I would be kicking a soccer ball, or playing hopscotch waiting for the bell to ring, but like the wave, I did not feel like joining. I was missing out, and I knew that I could join whenever, but instead of choosing to do something that would make me feel good, I chose not to. Right about then, I remembered something my dad had told me. "If we can't laugh at ourselves, our lives will be filled with bitterness and resentment, because without laughing at yourself, then it seems like everybody is laughing *at* you. If you laugh too, they're laughing *with* you. It's your choice how to perceive it." I knew that the whole hullabaloo was funny, and I took dad's advice. So, standing against the portable, for no apparent reason to onlookers, I laughed. I laughed and laughed, and it felt so good. It felt good to be happy, good to laugh, and good to recognize something funny. I thought to myself, "*Wait till I tell my buddies about this!*" And when I did, boy did they howl, and do you know what? I did too.

HONOURABLE MENTION/MENTION HONORABLE (GRADES 7-8/7^E - 8^E ANNÉES)

Noah Box - *Dance with the Devil*

The giant garage door made a loud crashing sound as it slammed onto the hard concrete floor. The September air was colder than the hearts of the three young men standing in the garage wearing hoodies and oversized pants. A strong breeze shot through an open window and smacked Marcus in the face. He shook off the sudden chill that went through his body and strode briskly toward the group before speaking,

“What up blood?” Marcus asked one of the men as he adjusted the hood of his light grey sweatshirt. The man was light-skinned with short, dreadlocked hair and several chains that he bore with pride. Everything he wore was designer, from his hat to his socks. This was not to say, however, that the man was rich or had a rich upbringing. The man was from the streets of Toronto. He fought for every thread of the clothes he wore. His Jordan 4’s squeaked onto the smooth floor as he quickly turned to Marcus and smiled.

“Yo Marcus, what’s good?” the man replied, performing a handshake with Marcus. Unlike the first man, Marcus had taken to the streets of his own accord. He was influenced by the brutal gangs of Toronto when he was only twelve. Marcus’ single mother, of course, hadn’t wanted this for him. She fought hard to keep Marcus and his older brother off the streets. Despite her great efforts, she failed. Marcus’ brother died at the age of fifteen due to a drive-by shooting and Marcus himself had joined a gang. Marcus still lived with his mother and uncle in a two bedroom house in the heart of Toronto. None of the other people in the garage knew about Marcus’ past, except for the first man, Jayce. After greeting each person individually, Marcus turned his attention to a tall, sinewy man wearing ripped jeans and a sweatshirt.

“Yo Immanuel, I heard you got shot a while back. You good?” Marcus questioned.

“I’m a’ight.” replied Immanuel in a muffled tone. Marcus then looked to his left to see a black man of average stature with multiple tattoos on his neck and face wearing a black puffer jacket.

“Yo, Ryder.” Marcus exclaimed enthusiastically as he fist-bumped the man.

“Marcus, what’s good.” the man replied smugly.

“Hey, Marcus, you know where Bleecker Street is?” questioned the first man,

“I think so. It’s by Wellesley Street, right?”

“Yeah, it is. There’s a house on the end of the street where this rich old lady lives. Apparently, she’s got thousands just stashed away there.”

“How do you know all this Jayce?”

“I’ve got my sources man. Anyways, we were all tryin’ to meet up there next Tuesday. You down?”

“Hold up, you wanna rob some random old lady?”

“Yeah, man. What’s the worst that could happen? There’s a fence we can jump to get onto Wellesley Street and from there we can run to Mo’s house if she calls the cops.”

“Bro, it sounds like you’ve been doing your homework.”

“You have no idea. So are you down?”

“A’ight, I guess I’ll come.”

“Bet bro.” Jayce responded eagerly.

As the night drew out, more and more people entered the garage to escape from the crisp Toronto air. By midnight, a crowd of more than thirty people crammed into it. At half past 2:00, as Marcus was leaving, he received a tap on the shoulder from Jayce. He took Marcus aside, gazing intensely into his eyes.

“You know you don’t have to do this.” Jayce told Marcus directly.

“What?” Marcus responded heatedly.

“I remember a few years ago you didn’t want to get into this stuff. I’m not trying to pressure you into this.”

“I’m not a pussy Jayce.”

“You won’t be a pussy if you don’t do this.”

“I’on care, okay? Just get off my dick about it.” Marcus stormed out of the garage before Jayce could say anything else.

The sun began its steady ascent upwards as Marcus' cluttered room filled with light. He slowly stirred and sat up, coughing. He could hear gunshots outside a few streets away. Marcus groaned as he got out of bed. He walked over to his minuscule bathroom and splashed his face with water. The sudden coolness awoke Marcus who had essentially been sleepwalking. He quickly put on his clothes and took \$50.00 from a compartment in his dresser drawer that contained most, if not all, of his money.

The front door of Marcus' tiny Toronto house swung open and he, sporting a green backpack, t-shirt and jeans, exited the abode. Almost immediately he ran into a group of men who had been at the garage the night prior.

"Yo, Marcus?"

"Yo Mav, what's good?"

Marcus spotted Jayce at the back of the posse and locked eyes with him for a brief moment. He greeted several other men in the group before Jayce spoke,

"Yo Marcus you still comin' tonight?" Jayce asked coolly.

"Ya I'm still down." Marcus stated unsurely.

Jayce could sense the uneasiness in Marcus' voice.

"Are you still heated about what I said last night?" Jayce questioned clearly.

"Bro what?"

"Are you mad?" Jayce demanded more aggressively this time.

"Nah bro, we're chill."

"So you still down to run that shit?"

"Ya fo'show"

"Bet."

Marcus spent the rest of the day with the men, returning home just after 8:00 with Jayce.

"We're all gonna meet up at 11:30 at the park on Dally Street." Jayce announced as he closed Marcus' front door.

"Who's gonna be there?"

"Ryder and Rayon and his friend."

"Should I bring the pole?"

"I'm going to...just in case."

"A'ight."

"Bet, imma see you then bro."

"See you later."

As darkness crept across the streets of Toronto, Marcus put on a red balaclava and a Pittsburgh Pirates hat. He took a gun from a box underneath his bed, swiftly stuck it in his baggy jeans and left the house. The wind howled like a wolf to the moon. Marcus felt raindrops roll down his back as he made his way to the park. The sky was dark, the moon blocked by clouds. The usually bustling Toronto streets were desolate and empty. As car horns honked in the distance, Marcus saw a figure approaching slowly. He continued his march until he was close enough to identify the figure as an elderly woman. Am I really going to rob some old lady? Just like this one? Innocent and harmless. These thoughts raced through Marcus' mind as the pale woman nodded at him. Out of nowhere, memories hit Marcus like a brick. He remembered when he was only eleven, how his mom tried to keep him from the vicious streets of Toronto. Marcus stopped walking for a moment as he processed his decision. He could turn back now. This was his chance. He turned around, hesitated and then started walking to the park once again.

Thoughts swam through Marcus' head. His arms were heavy and he felt weak. Despite this, he continued his trek, occasionally stopping and looking behind him. He was getting close now. The clouds had rolled out and the giant moon illuminated the park. Marcus could make out two hooded figures underneath a small maple tree. One of them carried a bag and the other was clearly grasping something in his hand. There was no going back now. As Marcus began his steady approach towards the men, they noticed him.

"Yo is that Marcus?" one of them exclaimed.

“What’s good?” Marcus shouted back. As he got closer to the men, his worry diminished slightly. It was Jayce and Ryder under the tree.

“We’re waiting for Rayon and Red.” Jayce informed Marcus.

“Red?” Marcus inquired, not knowing the man.

“He’s Rayon’s friend. His real name’s Nahiem.”

“A’ight.” Marcus replied. The air became colder as a result of the harsh winds picking up.

“Damn, it’s getting cold.” Marcus commented to no response.

“We know what we’re doing right?” Jayce quizzed the group.

“Yeah.” Marcus and Ryder responded in unison.

Jayce quickly went over the plan,

“We hop the fence in the backyard and get in the house through one of the lower windows.”

As Jayce continued, Ryder noticed two men approaching from a small gap between two apartment buildings.

“Yo Jayce, I think that’s Rayon and Red right there.” Ryder muttered in a hushed voice.

“Ya, okay.” Jayce responded.

The group walked towards Rayon and Red slowly. Things were beginning to get serious. Marcus’ heart raced as the hands in his pockets became sweaty.

“Yo, Rayon.” Jayce boomed.

“What’s up?” Rayon said in a more hushed voice. Red remained a bit behind Rayon as the two bands confronted each other under a lamppost in the centre of the park. The rain had ceased for a moment, but now it was coming down heavier. The cold weapon pressed against Marcus’ thigh, causing him to squirm. He adjusted the gun to fit more comfortably in his pants. Red noticed this and commented,

“Yo, you strapped?”

“Ya.” Marcus replied confidently.

“I didn’t know we were supposed to bring shit.” Red huffed as he pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head. He wore a ski mask and a black and grey tracksuit.

“You’re good bro.” Marcus comforted Red.

As rain splashed around the group, they picked up their pace and got closer to Bleecker Street. Briefly forgetting about his initial concerns, Marcus thought of what he would do with the stolen money after he got it. Jayce had said that the woman had more than 200,000 dollars stored in a safe in her basement. After it was divided up, Marcus could have upwards of 50,000 dollars. He would never be in financial trouble again. He might even be able to leave this life of crime and violence behind him. He was getting too far ahead though.

“Alright, we’re almost there.” Jayce remarked, bringing Marcus back to the desolate street and away from his thoughts. The house was visible at this point, which was noticed by Ryder.

“Yo is that it?” Ryder asked, gazing at the giant grey house.

“Ya, that’s the one.” Jayce replied squinting at the building.

“Are you guys ready?” Rayon asked the men.

“Yeah.” Marcus and Ryder responded in unison.

“Alright, let’s go.” Jayce blurted as he put on a tight balaclava, pulling a hood over the white Nike symbol on it.

Marcus surveyed the street and then signalled for the group to move. They ran to the backyard of the home and climbed over the tall wooden fence with ease. The backyard was surprisingly small for a house so large and luxurious. There was a small flower bed near a corner of the house with a watering can beside it. The grass in the yard was decaying and there were several patches that were already completely dead.

“Alright, we’ll go in through there.” Jayce whispered, pointing at a dirt-covered window with several cobwebs on it. As the men shuffled towards it, Jayce pulled out a crowbar from his black and grey duffle bag.

“In and out.” Jayce told the men before smashing the window open with the crowbar. Jayce was the first to enter the house, followed by Ryder. The two immediately darted to the basement, going down a short, carpeted staircase. Next was Marcus, who crawled through the small space and fell onto a bumpy concrete floor. He quickly stood up and ran down the stairs behind Jayce and Ryder. He stumbled down the steps clumsily before arriving in the freezing basement.

“Check out that room.” Jayce instructed Marcus upon seeing him. He dashed to the room Jayce had

pointed out and opened the white door. There was a bed with a nighttable beside it. Marcus turned on a light, illuminating the room. The bed was nicely made and the room was well put together aside from the dust coating most of the space. He ruffled through the nighttable, finding nothing of use. There was a muffled crashing sound above Marcus, causing him to jump. He exited the room for a moment before Jayce directed him back.

"It was nothing. Someone just knocked something over." Jayce comforted. Marcus returned to the room and continued his search. He scanned the area for any sign of wealth, but found nothing of interest. He turned off the light and left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Nothing." Marcus informed Jayce.

"Alright, go upstairs and look there."

Marcus followed this order and bolted back up the stairs. His legs felt weak as he reached the second floor of the house. Rayon flinched when he saw Marcus, reaching for something in his pants, but upon realizing that there was no threat he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Go to the room at the end of that hall. We haven't checked it yet." Rayon ordered. Marcus crept towards the room slowly, for fear of being heard. Before he could reach the room however, he heard a creaking noise behind him.

"What the-"

Marcus whirled around to see a middle-aged white man standing in awe at the sight of Marcus. Without thinking, Marcus reached for his gun and shot the man in the stomach. His face whitened and he slowly fell back onto the hard wooden floorboards. Marcus stood in shock, looking at the body of the man on the floor. The life drained from him, a puddle of blood amassed around the body. The man gasped for air, but couldn't find any. As the group crowded around Marcus, a faint gasp could be heard from behind the dead man. A young girl came from out of the darkness and knelt down over the body. She looked at Marcus and then began to sob wildly. This wasn't an old lady's house. Before he even knew what he was doing, Marcus jumped through the window, hopped the fence in the backyard, and sprinted down the street. He could hear the footsteps of the other men behind him, but he paid no mind to them. He shot down an alleyway and dropped down to his knees.

The rain had stopped. Marcus looked up at the twinkling night sky and screamed for God, but God wasn't there. The devil looked back. He gazed into Marcus with his shadowy black eyes and stared at him, smiling. Marcus looked into those eyes and saw his mother raising a worthless child, working late to keep that child away from the streets, never resting, all for the good of her son. Her son who killed an innocent man, a man with children, a man with a life. Marcus tried to look away, but the eyes were mesmerizing. He knew then what he had to do. He seized the gun that he had used to murder, he gripped it tight, he raised it to his head, and he pulled the trigger. His eyes glazed over and the devil laughed. He laughed at a fallen angel.

WINNER/GAGNANT (GRADES 9-10/9^E - 10^E ANNÉES)
Tristyn Birkenbergs - The Mountain We Used to Call Home

I guess one thing I should've learned early on was how much pain one life entails. The sky is dark and grim as always and the trees are dead and barren. The fences surrounding me are tall, too tall to climb, and the wire on top is sharp. As I walk through the narrow path, I hear people's screams in the distance. Around me the guards prowl the lands, their weapons strapped to their belts. I hate this place. This place used to be the pride of a people whose name is long forgotten, my people. The mountain which now holds our prison used to be a sacred land. It was our home, our provider, our protector, and the source of our prosperity. According to our legends, the mountain was blessed to have magical properties. We never had to worry about droughts, famishes, floods, or forest fires, because the mountain protected us. Others learned of our prosperity and decided they wanted it for themselves. They came in large armies and took our land. They pillaged, assaulted, murdered, and abducted. This was in the lifetime of my great grandfather. They took the survivors to mental institutions or prisons to be experimented on. Who better for testing than the primitives from the mountain, as they so call us. After a year the invaders began to realise the great mountain wasn't protecting them. Floods and windstorms were destroying the land, and no plants would grow in the soil. Scared, the invaders began to torture my people for information.

My people would plead with their captors, "We do not know what happened. The mountain protected us always. We do not know what changed, please believe us." Unsurprisingly, the invaders did not believe them and many died during these so-called interviews. After six months of unending suffering, the invaders became convinced that the mountain only protected us. So they built an expansive prison up and down the mountain. It has many foot trails, so that we can move around the mountain. Not of free will of course. We are kept as slaves to the people who stole our ancestral home. Every person has a bunk in a complex at the base of the prison. The bunk rooms are locked from the outside at night, and they have no windows. The only sounds are the screams of those being tortured or killed in the very same complex we sleep in. Every morning, before it is light, we are awoken to the sound of an alarm that signals the beginning of work. We are never told the time of day or direction we are walking in. We are just led through trails in the same pattern everyday until long after it is dark. Then we return to the complex.

My ward is hauling the day's harvest from the soil plateau to the warden's complex. The trek is long and treacherous, but we are careful not to stumble. If we do, the consequences can be brutal. The path is reaching an incredibly steep part so I steady myself for the climb. In an instant it is harder to find solid footing and my legs begin to burn. Moments later I see the leading girl trip over an exposed root. It seems she tried to stand on it and it broke. She hurries to her feet and collects her basket, but it is too late. A guard is already at her side.

"You primitive child," he spat. "How dare you spoil our food! Shame upon you!"
The girl just bowed her head and stood silently.

His face changed from cold to wicked in an instant, "Lay your basket on the ground, and turn around."

The girl did as she was told, even as tears began to roll down her face. The guard took a coiled leather strap off his belt and waved it. The horrible snap makes everyone flinch and the girl screams. Her fear only makes the guard more eager and he begins to lash her. Everytime the strap hits she screams, and begs him to stop. He never does. I'm just staring at her. Her horror, her pain, as he keeps on hitting her. Eventually there is blood everywhere and she is lying on the ground, her feet refusing to bear her weight. As I stare at her I see her face pale, eyes freeze in place and body go completely numb. The guard finally stops. I've never seen the angel of death in person before. I was expecting something more comforting. I thought her eyes would close and face would soften in peace. Instead she stays wide eyed, her face contorted in unending pain. The guard commands us to keep moving and gives the new leader the dead girl's basket. As I pass, I close my eyes. I'm too afraid to look at her. After a few steps I open my eyes to find nothing but the treacherous walk ahead. The ones who remain very carefully walk up the mountain.

We finally finish the climb and dump our baskets into the large machines. As I walk back down, laundry baskets under each arm, I think about the girl who died. I should've done more. Changed more. Fought back maybe. So I am going to do just that. Next time I see that kind of pain, I will fight.

The next day begins as any other does. As I am loading the harvest into my baskets, I see a small child. No one under the age of twelve is in my ward so I am slightly confused. Then I see many more of them, not a single one over about six. They are all being led somewhere. I try not to think of where. One of them, a small boy, trips. He scrambles back to his feet, but is forced to take a lash to the hands. My heart is throbbing, *'stop the pain'*. The child continues walking.

I hear the screams of my people echo through the mountain, *'stop the pain'*.

I see a guard haul off a woman from a different ward, *'stop the pain'*.

That chant continues in my heart for three days.

On the third day, I am finishing my duties when I see the guards drag a girl, not much older than me, by the hair. As I crane my neck to see what's happening, I see a guard throw her on the ground. He's laughing and staring down at her. That's it. I turn to my guard to see him looking away. The chant rings in my ears, *'stop the pain, stop the pain, stop the pain'*. I begin to sprint. I run straight for the guard with the girl on the floor and tackle him. He immediately hits me, but I do not yield.

"These are my people! This is our home! You have no right to treat us like this!"

The guard hits me again and this time manages to push me into the fence that surrounds the path. He hastily takes out his strap and swings at me. I dodge and strike him with my foot. He doesn't like that. He lunges for me and manages to get me on my back. I try to hit him. To squirm away, but I am unable. So he beats me. Over and over again; all I feel is pain. I can't tell if I'm bleeding at this point, or rather where I'm bleeding from. He stops to look at me and sees me staring back at him. He smirks, grabs me, and tosses me to the other side of him. He uses chains to hold my hands together and drags me to a nearby cliff edge. He attaches my chains to a high point of the cliff. This type of punishment is common. It is painful because the chains dig into your wrists and your limbs feel like they may fall off, but it is also terrifying because you are on the side of a mountain and just hanging there. I breathe through the pain in my wrists and close my eyes so I can't see the lack of ground beneath me. He leaves me here all night, and only returns when the work alarm sounds in the morning.

With an evil smile he asks, "Now have you learned your lesson?"

I nod, but I know this is only the beginning of my rebellion.

For weeks afterwards, I do small things to cause disruption and receive punishment, just not nearly as severe. I will purposely walk slowly, so that less work is done or look the guards in the eyes when they talk to me. This aggravates them, but they do not harm me. They already killed one girl in my ward and the only thing they care about is work. Without me, it's less work being done. Everyday I see more pain and fear, so I try to stop it. The legends may lie about this mountain, but our people are worth saving. The mountain may protect no one, but I will. If a guard tries to harm someone, I will jump in the way and bear the pain myself. It's my way of showing that we are not yet broken. Beaten, bruised, and wounded, but not broken.

As I start my morning jobs, I notice more guards are following my ward. I think they're here to stop me from doing anything. That's when I notice that we are being led down a different foot path. We follow it high into the mountain until the air is cold. Then I see the cliff.

A guard yells to my ward, "This is for the disruption to work, the arrogance, and the audacity you have."

No. Not for my actions. Send me off the cliff, not everyone. They have done nothing.

All the girls are shoved forward but me.

"It was me who caused the problem. Leave the others."

The guards chuckle, "But you do not want to live. It will leave you in much more grief to see the girls in your ward die, while you live on."

"No! Please! They have done nothing!" I cry and scramble to get to the edge, but guards restrain me.

"This is your punishment."

The guard brings out a long steel pole, an execution device meant to push many people at once. I am in more pain than I've ever been. *What have I done?* The girls are shaking, but not one of them is trying to flee.

The pole hits their backs but the guard stops, "Is there anything you would like to say to your killer?"

They all turn and face me. I am on my knees sobbing and trying to fight my way from behind the guards.

"You did not kill us. You fought for us," one of them said, "Do not hate yourself for our fate, then they will win. They are our killers not you. Continue to fight. For our home, our people."

"That's enough!" The guard shouts.

“No!”

The guard pushes on the pole, I hear the screams as they fall from the mountain.

“Murderer!”

The guard smiles, “Not I. You.”

I could not bring myself to fight anymore, for fear of what it would do to the new girls in my ward. I stay silent again for months and think of nothing but the girls I killed. The guard who pushed them laughs at me as I pass, *Not I. You*. I strain to remember what that girl’s last words were. At the time I could barely hear them over my racing thoughts. Then as I walk I see a common sight. A young girl, probably about twelve, being lashed by the guard from the cliff. Then I remember what that girl said. *Fight. For our people. You did not kill us. You fought for us. Do not hate yourself. Fight.* I saw them all at the edge of the cliff and I heard her voice, *fight*. I tell myself to keep walking. These other girls will die too, and it will be my fault. *Fight*. I can’t, not anymore. Not after what happened. *Fight*. I look over one more time, and I see the angel of death. It is coming for her. I charge forward and jump over top of the girl. The lash feels like a bolt of lightning. It stings and it burns, but I bear it, because the girl is still breathing. I bear this pain, so that she doesn’t meet the angel of death. Not like the girl on the trail, or the others in my ward, or any of the people screaming the cries I hear around me. *Fight*. I turn and face the guard, who is awestruck. It seems he has been stunned. I use that to my advantage and the grab dagger strapped to his side. The guard tries to lash me, but I block it with my arm. I slice through his shoulder and he drops his lash. I strike him and he falls on his back. Guards are coming from all around now, but I am not done yet.

I drop down and whisper in his ear, “This is for the girls you murdered. I am fighting for my people, for my home. You torture innocents. I should kill you for all that you have done to my people, but I will not. I am not like the evil inside you. I have a heart that aches at the screams in these mountains; your heart is nothing but a black hole. Now you will feel the pain you inflict.”

I grab his lash and roll him over. I strike once, twice, three times, and I scream, “The pain you inflict! The pain of my people!”

Guards tackle me and beat me until I nearly fall unconscious. The last thing I hear is the guards’ screams, so I shout again “The pain you inflict! The pain of my people!” I am then drugged and dragged away in chains.

Now I lay here, chained to a large piece of metal. The pain has taken over every part of me and I cannot think of anything else. I have lost track of how long it has been, all I know is the pain I feel now. I suffer this for my people. I have never been in this much agony and every moment sends different sparks of misery up my body. My people experience this everyday, and now here I am. On the same mountain my great grandfather cherished and loved. The same mountain that protected them, gave them prosperity and hope. Now I lie in excruciating pain as they manipulate my body in different ways. Only one thought has managed to break through the pain in my mind. The one thought that is keeping my mind alive. *Will we ever escape from the mountain we used to call home?*

HONOURABLE MENTION/MENTION HONORABLE (GRADES 9-10/9^E - 10^E ANNÉES)

Sophie Corkum - *Thoughts of a Waiting Man*

Maat would give one of her feathers to place on a golden scale. This feather she gifted would be lighter than air. Next to the feather was an empty place on the scale. A sunken man with a dark complexion placed his heart on the scale. There was a moment where the heart and feather were equal. But the man's heart was drenched in guilt. It was rotten and dark. If someone could see inside that heart they would surely go mad. Their eyes would rot from their skull, their brain would leak from their ears. It would be a horrible thing to see inside that heart. The man of course knew his heart was dead. Beads of sweat dripped down his forehead and he grabbed at his torn shirt. Then the moment of hope passed and the scale fell, taking the heart with it. With that he was banished from the afterlife and that was that.

We all need to make a decision in our lives that seems like life or death feeling similar to that moment before the scale moves. This was what a young man felt like. His grip tight on a rope, his body dangling from that rope. Isn't it strange how quickly things can escalate. One minute this man was on a hike observing the world around him, beautiful it was. This hiking trail had recently closed down and no one was meant to be on it. The man however decided to visit it one last time. He was moving away you see. He was going to move out to live with his fiancé in his first home. He had come to this trail many times before and he wanted to see it one last time. He had walked out to the edge of a cliff and looked out taking in the scene, he would never see again. At that moment the rock beneath him gave way. The man grasped at anything near him leaves and sticks breaking and slipping from his hands.

He was falling; he grabbed at the rock and felt his hands grasp a rope that was leftover from construction. He held on to the rope which was beginning to tear at his hands. This man tried to pull himself up with all the strength he had but he couldn't. He has never had good upper arm strength. He looked around at his back pocket where his phone had been. It was gone. This man was hanging by a rope he couldn't climb up and nobody was coming to save him. He was going to die. His hand was going to slip, or the rope would break. Or he would let go. He had to let go, because then he had control. Then he could decide when it was time. He held on very tight to make sure he wouldn't slip. He tried to hope. Of course this was unreal.

Nobody thinks something like this could happen to them. This situation is the thing you hear about on the news the person that nobody has a connection to. The truth is: making ourselves believe that we are invincible to an accident is just saving our minds from slipping into a paranoid madness. It can happen to anyone. It is a series of things that happen taking away any of them could have saved him. If he wasn't moving he wouldn't feel the need to come back. If he didn't go for a walk he wouldn't have been here. If he hadn't taken that turn he would be fine, if he hadn't gone to that cliff he would live a long happy life. But he did every one of those things and he was here now, hanging from a rope holding on for dear life even though he knew, deep down, that death was imminent. He wished so hard that he could go back in time and not do one of those things but unfortunately he can't. This did happen to him. This unimaginable thing this situation that will 100 per cent lead to death was happening to him. He was going to die.

He thought " how... I am supposed to get married in the summer. I was supposed to move away. I was supposed to get a new teaching job, my first one where I'm not a substitute. I was supposed to have my own class. I was supposed to help each one of those kids reach their dreams. Me and Gabriella were supposed to start a family. I was supposed to be a father." Tears came out his eyes and his heart started racing. He panicked; he needed to survive; he wasn't ready to die; he had barely lived. You're not supposed to be ready to die until you are content with the life you have lived. He wasn't content with the life he had lived. He had done everything right in life. Why was this happening to him? Because this is something that can happen. How could there be a god if it was letting this happen to him? His mother had always been religious; he never could fathom that there could be an all-powerful being in the sky, controlling humanity like billions of tiny marionettes.

“My mother” he thought “ my mother she is gonna lose her baby boy” how could he do this to her. Leaving her and never being able to visit again. She would be driven to madness. He was an only child, her only child. A lump rose in his throat. He can’t die like this. To most young people death is a myth; it’s an urban legend people swear it happens but you never really believe it’s real. It just doesn’t seem real. How could we be given life? How could we come to be? Nobody knows how we could possibly exist but we do. We do exist. And then you just stop. You no longer exist. He thought, “ what even happens?.. What happens when we die? An afterlife isn’t scientifically possible but then again we barely understand life, there is so much we don’t know.. how could we prove an afterlife doesn’t exist if we can barely understand life let alone death?” He felt calmer. It could be possible he could once again see the life he loved. “ but it’s just as equally possible that nothing happens. Our sense of existing just stops. Maybe when he died the earth would absorb him and he would turn into a flower. Maybe he could be reincarnated. But he wasn’t done with this life yet. But there was no way to survive this. He knew deep down this was the end.

“Why am I so very worried about a life I haven’t lived, when I could be happy with the life I have made.” He thought. He went through school, he learned amazing things, he made strong friendships, he was loved by his family and he made memories. He fell in love. Even though they were now never going to be married, he knew that even though it hadn’t been legalized, that they were in love he loved her and she loved him. That was better than marriage to him. He might not have been able to have a child and be a father but he did change the lives of many kids he had taught. That was close to fatherhood. He had been alive. It was short but it was good. It’s ok. He was scared. But he realized that was ok. He was gonna die. That’s terrifying. But it was going to happen anyway.

He could let go. It was going to happen either way. He took a deep breath. He had never realized how good it felt to breathe. How good the summer breeze felt. How nice the forest smelled. It was ok. He could become a part of that. He could become a part of the summer breeze. The forest smell. The breath that is breathed. It was awful that this was happening. But even though he didn’t feel ready he had to do it. Like when a child is given a vaccine it hurts. Even though you can barely remember the feeling of one, you think it is just tremendously painful. But you know it needs to happen, you know you need to get it, you need to just let go. So after telling the doctor “wait, wait a minute... stop, I’m not ready yet” at least six times you either let go and it happens and it’s not as bad as you thought it would be, or the doctor just grabs your arm and gives you the needle. The man let go even though it was terrifying, he released his grip and felt how terrifying it was to fall such great lengths. But it started to feel like he could fly. The wonder he got to feel. Why can you only feel that wonder before you die? It’s a reward for letting go. You get to feel wonder you get to have one last amazing memory before you die. And then? Then it ends.

He wasn’t ready to die in the end before impact. He panicked, filled with regret, but he did manage a moment of peace. I don’t think, no matter how ready we convince ourselves we are, no matter how strong people make themselves out to be, that anybody is ever really ready. But does that need to control our lives and what we do? If the man hadn’t gone back to his favorite childhood spot he might be alive. If he had not gone back though, He would still be filled with regret. He might have spent the rest of his life wishing he had gone there. He might have spent his whole life with a cavity in his chest that could only be filled by a place that no longer existed. In the end we all die, this is a dark truth that people hate thinking about. It doesn’t have to be dark, we can use it to live the best life we can. If the grim reaper will always catch up to us in the end why should we spend our lives carefully avoiding it. The man would agree to live your life without regret. Because we all die, but some of us never live.

WINNER/GAGNANT (GRADES 11-12/11^E - 12^E ANNÉES)

Victoria Zalewski - *Spilled Milk*

In a stifling heat, on a stifling suburban road, a girl knows she should not be crying. Not over a puddle of milk curdling on tacky asphalt. Not over something so small.

But the thing is, before that, the milk jug is cool. Fresh. Entirely whole. It hides in a plastic bag bouncing off the girl's bony legs, on a day too hot for her to be walking so weightless and quick. The air practically wavers. The sky practically drips blue onto the sidewalk. It is too hot a day for the girl to be smiling, crooked and giddy, as if everyone else was not melting – but today, she is shameless. Vitalized through a newfound pride. Her head is held so high, in fact, that she does not see the bottom of the bag being pulled like pink bubblegum.

Not until glass skitters across the road. Not until milk drips between cracks of a sewer grate.

Before that, the milk stutters along a rusted conveyor belt. It is a jerky pattern. Tiny white waves batter the confines of their glass world. They calm, become ripples, become stillness, then break out again as the line moves forward. The girl understands this sort of turbulence. A tension blankets the grocery store, magnifying the lights so sweat slips lazy down her neck. It does not help that the man in front of her stands so close his arm hair tickles, or that he talks to the cashier like the words do not stick inside his throat. Like it is easy. Turbulence bubbles under her skin, because she feels eyes on her lanky body. They burn holes into her flesh and through it, make her want to rip off her skin and run red into the hot day – but before she can, the milk stills. She sees the turbulence eventually end.

So, when the cashier asks, “paper or plastic?” the girl stills long enough to spit out, “plastic.”

Before that, the milk sits pretty inside the refrigerator. A sparkling dress of condensation adorns the jug, and for the girl leaning against this scalding brick wall – looking in through the store window at hazardous, unexplored territory – it is heaven just to think of. Milk wetting her parched throat. Milk pouring over her sun-burnt scalp. Milk taken home and blended thick into a shake, or frozen into an ice cream, or just poured into a cup because milk is endless like that. Has endless potential like that. Milk transforms to fit any mold, and it is this delicious possibility that draws an unseen courage from the girl – one that pushes down her fear, pushes her through the motion-activated doors.

So later, when a puddle of milk curdles on tacky asphalt, the girl knows she should not cry – but she does. She cries for the ice-cold dress. She cries for the little white waves. She cries for the cool glass and the reverberating sound of it cracking open. She cries for everything that spilled onto that stifling suburban road.

HONOURABLE MENTION/MENTION HONORABLE (GRADES 11-12/11^E - 12^E ANNÉES)

Amel Amrouche - *Moi, diagramme de vaine*

On m'a déjà dit que je suis un dictionnaire. Pas comme un compliment. Enfin, je ne crois pas. Dictionnaire, c'est lourd, c'est pesant... c'est snob. Et moi, je refuse d'être ça. D'être snob. Snob, c'est ces sérieux cyniques qui aiment rêvasser sur leur importance au sein du cosmos. C'est ceux qui observent l'univers du bout du nez, qui roulent les yeux dans leurs paupières hautaines et qui payent des prix incroyables pour des bouchées. Alors que moi, primo, je ne regarde pas les gens de haut — j'suis trop petite. Deuxio, j'échappe pas de roulements d'yeux — ça me fait trop mal à la tête. Tertio, je n'achète pas ces minuscules fromages qui empestent à l'épicerie. 25 \$ pour 50 g ! C'est du vol ça, et j'en ai de l'expérience.

De toute façon, il ne me reste qu'assez d'argent pour une gourmandise. Un sachet de chocolat rose indiscret pour les amoureux encore inconscient du regard des autres ? Ou des biscuits au gingembre, réduction de 20 % de sucre, beaucoup plus santé ? Mais le gingembre, j'aime pas trop. Et de toute manière, ses consommateurs sont ceux de la génération qui considère dormir comme une perte de temps. Je ne me souscris pas à ce principe, de toute évidence.

Des fruits ? Là, avec tous les légumes que je suis venue acheter, j'aurai l'air d'une végétalienne. Ou d'une végétarienne. Ou quelqu'une qui cherche à garder la ligne. Une ligne brisée, certes, mais une ligne. J'aurai l'air d'une mordue de laitues. Ou même d'une propriétaire de lapereaux affamés. Les chats, ça ne mange pas de salades.

Alors, on y va pour les biscuits de gingembre. Avec du lait, je pourrais faire passer. La voisine en prendrait lorsqu'elle viendra, elle aussi. À moins qu'elle déteste. Là, aucune délivrance. Va falloir les gober. Je gaspille pas moi, je gaspille jamais. C'est pas pour l'environnement. C'est pour ma conscience. Parce que je suis consciente, ne serait-ce d'insignifiantes choses.

Je tourne un coin et j'arrive à la caisse. Avec mon chariot rempli de biens, je trotte jusqu'à l'employé qui me dévisage. Ou me regarde. Peut-être qu'il est myope et qu'il a oublié de porter des lunettes. Voilà pourquoi il fronce des sourcils peut-être. Mais je fais comme si je n'avais pas remarqué. Sourire éclatant accroché à la figure, je le salue. Il réplique, stupide :

- Est-ce que je vous connais ?

Bah non, vous ne me connaissez pas. Je vous connais pas, pourquoi me connaîtriez-vous ? Je ne suis pas une célébrité, quand même. Vous m'avez peut-être vue ailleurs. Peut-être que mon physique vous rappelle quelqu'un d'autre. Mais j'ai une allure ordinaire. Rien de remarquable. Pas de cheveux trop vifs, trop longs, trop courts, pas de nez prononcé, pas de front trop large, pas de menton pointu, pas de boutons d'acnés, pas des lèvres pulpeuses, pas de lunettes, pas de moustache, pas d'oreilles décollées, pas de sourcils trop fournis, pas de cernes creux et violets, pas de joues perpétuellement rouges, pas un teint gris, pas de couleur d'yeux inhabituelle, juste du marron. Aucune raison pour que vous vous souveniez de moi. Je fais partie de la vague des transparents dans les métros, de ceux qu'on oublie avant même de les avoir examinés.

- Non, pourquoi ?

Sourire éclatant à nouveau. Peut-être que c'est mon ton trop amical. Peut-être que c'est mon sourire. Mon énergie ? Mon aura ? Ne tombons pas dans la pseudoscience quand même, ma chère. Le caissier hausse les épaules.

Silence cassé par les bips de la machine. J'ai trop acheté. C'est long. J'accompagne du pied les sons du

magasin. Trop bruyant. Mais aussi trop énervé. Je ne veux pas donner la mauvaise impression. Je lève les yeux, et le regard rancunier ? agité ? fatigué ? du caissier se piège dans le mien. On détourne la tête, chacun de notre côté. Je ne veux vraiment pas donner la mauvaise impression. Je suis pas fâchée. Y a pas de problèmes. Je m'immobilise, pour ne rien montrer du tout. Je ne suis pas nerveuse. Fébrile, peut-être.

Mais c'est pas le temps d'agir ainsi. Mes mains frémissent un peu lorsque je dépose la monnaie. Ça me dégoûte. Mes mains ne font toujours qu'à leur tête. Je m'apprête à sortir, les membres tremblant sous le poids des sacs bourrés, quand je m'arrête. Sentiment de déjà-vu. Ce reflet de cette lumière sur cette vitre, je l'ai déjà observé. Une lumière réfléchi sur le plancher qui chauffe l'emplacement dans lequel je me trouve. C'est pas nouveau. Pas du tout. De l'appréhension se disperse en moi. Je connais cet instant.¹

Cet instant se brise presque aussitôt. Écharde de souvenirs contre ma tempe. La sortie s'approche de moi. Le chariot entre nous ne dérape pas. C'est moi qui déraile lorsqu'on veut encore me parler. J'ai l'air occupée, non ? Un homme accoté contre le mur me propose quelque chose que je perds en l'examinant. Je refuse. Me demande pourquoi. Je n'en sais rien, tout comme je ne sais rien de ce qu'il aurait pu dire. Le métal froid du chariot contre mes paumes. Mes orteils au chaud dans mes bottes pas si douillettes. Mon pull qui murmure contre ma peau. Je connais. Je comprends rien à ses nasillements. Je hoche la tête puis la secoue. Son attention se redirige vers moi. Elle s'était perdue entre ses mots, s'enroulant entre ses idées. Il me fixe pour dire :

- Elle est bizarre, celle-là.

Je ne réfute pas. J'ai toujours eu cette impression que j'étais légèrement folle. Frappent contre les parois de mon corps, mes pensées. Tirailent mon sommeil, mes souvenirs. Déboulent sur les pages que je colore, mes mots. J'ai pas toute ma tête, j'en suis consciente.

C'est pour ça que j'aime ce que je fais. Chaque jour, je me permets d'adopter un nouveau « moi », un meilleur « moi ». Je m'imagine puis j'en fais ma réalité. Je réfléchis à tout. Ma coiffure, ma carrure, ma carrière même. Et ainsi, pour une journée complète, ma carapace matérielle abrite une autre. J'essaie parfois de l'expliquer, mais ce sont des sourires hésitants qui me répondent. Incompréhensible. Fastidieuse. Connaît trop. Comme un dictionnaire.

On m'a déjà dit que je suis un dictionnaire. C'était pas un compliment. Je le sais. *Dictionnaire*, c'est vantard, c'est expert... c'est fou. Et moi, j'accepte ça, d'être folle. Folle, c'est pour celles qui cherchent toujours le mot juste, obsédée par une communication claire. C'est pour celles qui vivent la majorité de leur vie dans leurs têtes, analystes du quotidien. C'est pour celles trop imaginatives, trop contemplatives, trop connaisseuses. Trop.

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Mon souffle se dessine dans l'air froid de la voiture : tas de gribouillis sans queue ni tête. Je frotte mes mains ensemble, démarre l'appareil puis roule. Depuis que j'utilise ce véhicule, je suis reine des rues. Le monde défile devant mes yeux, et moi au-dessus de mon trône, je n'ai qu'à suivre la foulée laissée sur l'asphalte. Mon royaume s'étend de mon siège à ma vue périphérique, ma puissance incontestée.

Feu rouge. Je m'affale contre le dossier. Comprime mes paupières puis les ouvre. Un désordre orphelin avale tout espace dans ce véhicule. Sacs plastiques, boue dégueulasse s'imprimant sur le sol couvert de tapis, nausée de paresse et de stress. L'état de mon domaine pitoyable est pathétique. Plus j'observe ce que je crois statique, plus ça danse devant moi.

<sup>1</sup>**instant** n. m. **1.** Durée très courte que la conscience saisit comme un tout. -> moment. À *l'instant même...* *Un instant, s'il-vous-plaît.* **2.** Moment précis dans le temps. -> temps.

Exemple de phrase avec le mot **instant** : En un instant, je m'é gare. L'instant d'après, je me reprends. J'oscille entre ces deux dispositions.



Je roule à nouveau, tous les sens alertes. Ça me frustre, le multicolore devant moi. Ça me frustre, l'odeur de laisser-aller dans la voiture. Ça me frustre, la température extérieure gelant ma vue. Tout me tape sur les nerfs.

M' é N e R V e

Ma mère m'avait dit que j'étais hypersensible. Une hypersensibilité générationnelle. Le seul trait qu'on partage... Ce qui est faux bien sûr. Elle aimait simplement me répéter cette phrase quand je l'ennuyais. Je l'ennuyais beaucoup plus jeune. Je pense que je l'ennuierais encore si elle me voyait.

Je m'ennuie moi-même. Il y a des jours où je ne fais quasiment rien. Je lis. J'écris une phrase. Je dors. Un cycle qui semble s'étendre des fois toute une vie. Je m'amuse que lorsque je deviens « l'autre ». « L'autre » qui aurait voyagé en Afrique et en Asie. « L'autre » qui aurait étudié en Suisse, entourée de chocolat et de fromages. « L'autre » qui se contenterait de dicter ce qu'elle voulait dans sa garde-robe pour que des couturiers des quatre coins du monde le brodent. Une vraie princesse quoi.

Je ne suis princesse que de nom. Figure commune, manières pleines de lacunes, cœur comblé de rancune, je suis qu'une piètre marionnette des lettres qui forment l'aspect le plus important apparent de mon identité identification. Mon identité, on ne la connaîtra jamais.

Je rêve toujours du jour quand je me réveillerais dans un lit plus grand que ma chambre. Quand des valets accouraient pour m'aider à me débarbouiller. Quand la populace entière me reconnaîtra et que je n'endurais pas cette épine de terreur dans ma gorge.

Imposture, je le resterais au tréfonds de moi. Car mes actions ne témoignent rien de royal. Rien de haute classe. Rien de dictatorial. Je suis la bassesse incarnée. Ma personne complète est inventée. De mon arrogance mensongère, mes regards apeurés, mes souliers volés jusqu'au véhicule où je suis posée. Je ne suis qu'une tache informe prétendant être un tableau. Pablo Picasso se voulant écolo.

Et c'est drôle. Je trouve ça trop drôle. On ne voit pas à travers moi. Comme quoi, je me suis faite opaque, difficile à saisir, de peur de trahir mon secret. Je me suis faite impénétrable, effrayante, la méchante belle-mère du conte. Celle trop jolie et donc nécessairement laide à l'intérieur. Celle dont le visage a été poli, mais dont la gentillesse demeure au seuil inférieur. J'arrive à la maison.

Je stationne l'auto et reste avachie. Un ennui que j'aime dire passager me surplombe, me pousse plutôt à revisiter ma journée. À ressasser chaque minute, chaque heure envolée. Cette activité cyclique à laquelle je me prête quotidiennement m'est fort utile. M'aide à discerner mes fautes, les erreurs de fabrication. Disséquer ma personne pour en faire une nouvelle, version améliorée.

Par exemple, aujourd'hui :  
Ma démarche était trop synthétique lorsque je sortais de l'épicerie. Trop de mouvement de bras rigide, me donnant l'air trop sérieuse. Le sourire au caissier : j'aurais pu diminuer son intensité. Ma réponse à sa question a trahi ma nervosité. Faut pas montrer de vulnérabilité. Ensuite, éviter à tout prix les hommes accotés sur les murs, et du coup, les conversations bizarres. Une liste mentale neuve s'inscrit pour demain. Et se refera le lendemain.

Après tout, la pratique rend parfait. Et la perfection, c'est l'image que je veux de moi.

Je tapote ma poche et devine mon portefeuille. Ma possession la plus précieuse. D'un brun arbitraire, il ne contient que de la poussière et dix cartes. Je les sors toutes puis les étale sur mes cuisses. Huh. Elles me ressemblent toutes assez dans ces photos. Je n'ai pas des cheveux aussi noirs, mais on peut l'excuser par une différence d'éclairage. Ici, mon nez est plus fin qu'il ne l'est véritablement. Explicable par du maquillage. Je pense que pour celle-là, c'est les yeux, le problème. Ils ne sont pas aussi grands les miens ; les vrais. Je doute cependant qu'on me fasse un commentaire.

Je toise la signature au bout de chaque carte : tas de gribouillis sans queue ni tête. Je la déteste, mais y a rien à faire. Pour vivre, faut accepter ce qui est hors de notre contrôle.

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J'aurai voulu une conscience carrée. Sûre d'elle-même, ne se contredit jamais, et qui pousse contre tout ce qui ne lui plaît pas, lui semble mal. Mais, j'ai une conscience ovale, presque circulaire. Les bouts pointus se sont rasés à force de ma nonchalance. Je ne pique personne. Je ne dirais pas que je suis douce, enfin, pas de la douceur qu'on aime munir les femmes pour qu'elles ne ripostent pas. C'est seulement que je suis très bonne à m'effacer, à me rendre négligeable, un petit point dans la conversation. Et c'est bien, parce que c'est ce dont on s'attend de moi. Je n'attire pas l'attention.

En réalité, toutes mes actions attestent d'une certaine perception que j'ai. Ma mère l'appelait notre *affinité féminine*. Ça fait très « pouvoir magique », mais j'y crois à cette sorte de pseudoscience. Car il existe bel et bien une sensibilité, une perspicacité chez les femmes. Qui ne se manifeste pas nécessairement en douceur, qui est plusieurs fois ignorée, certes. C'est ce même sentiment d'empathie qui attise la moquerie de la fille dans mon cours de math, quand elle s'était jointe au groupe de gars qui me répétait que j'étais bizarre. (À ce temps-là, je n'avais pas encore maîtrisé l'art d'être juste assez étrange pour qu'on ne me questionne pas.) Cette sympathie parce qu'un jour ou l'autre, on sait toutes deux qu'on va se retrouver dans la situation opposée. Cette inclination qui crie « Aie pitié de moi, soit gentille avec moi », quand ça arriverait. Un instinct de conservation. Ma mère aimait aussi appeler cette connaissance *hypersensibilité*. Moi, j'abhorre ce terme. Je le considère comme trop simpliste. On cherche trop à tout comprendre et des fois et on s'attache, épingle sur nos théories, comme si celles-ci nous aidaient à revêtir l'habit de l'intellectuel. Idée bâtie, difficilement combattue. Je refuse ça, d'être hypersensible.

Qu'importe. La perception que les autres ont de moi n'est qu'illusoire. Je m'amuse avec leur notion d'elle, de cette femme-là, qui sourit un peu trop. Qui connaît un peu trop. Qui est étrange, un peu trop.

Je rentre chez moi. Noirceur absolue. Je tâtonne, mes doigts se cognant contre les murs carrés. Avance comme si le sol se constituait d'un tas de plumes que je ne veux pas bouger. Je lance mes affaires sur mon lit, carré encore. Carrée, toute ma maison. Le cercle serait la forme parfaite. Moi, j'aspire au lieu à être carré.

Je suis vaine, je le sais. Jusqu'au bout, me concentrant sur ce qui a peu de signification. Je suis vilaine. Fantasmant une conscience carrée, un imaginaire tenace. Je suis un peu de tout, mes « moi » se chevauchant pour n'en faire qu'une. Un diagramme de vaine.

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