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# FOREWORD

The School of Cities Image and Story Competition aims to engage undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Toronto in reflecting on their urban environment creatively. By capturing their personal and intimate responses to the city, students who participated in the competition helped us expand the scope of urban thinking at the School of Cities. We look forward to future iterations of this competition!

This year, we invited students to submit short stories accompanied by a visual work of art that together constitute a creative totality. Among many worthy submissions, our panel of three judges selected a winner and two honourable mentions in each category (undergraduate and graduate). We are thrilled to present them to you here! In assessing the entries, the judges looked for urban focus, originality, innovative style and structure, and the effectiveness of the relationship between story and image. The entries recognized here offer original and inspiring views of the urban environment, sometimes directly and sometimes implicitly querying how cities shape who we are.

This competition was generously supported by the School of Cities, the Department of English & Drama at UTM and the English Department at St. George.

Enjoy these creative urban voices from across U of T!

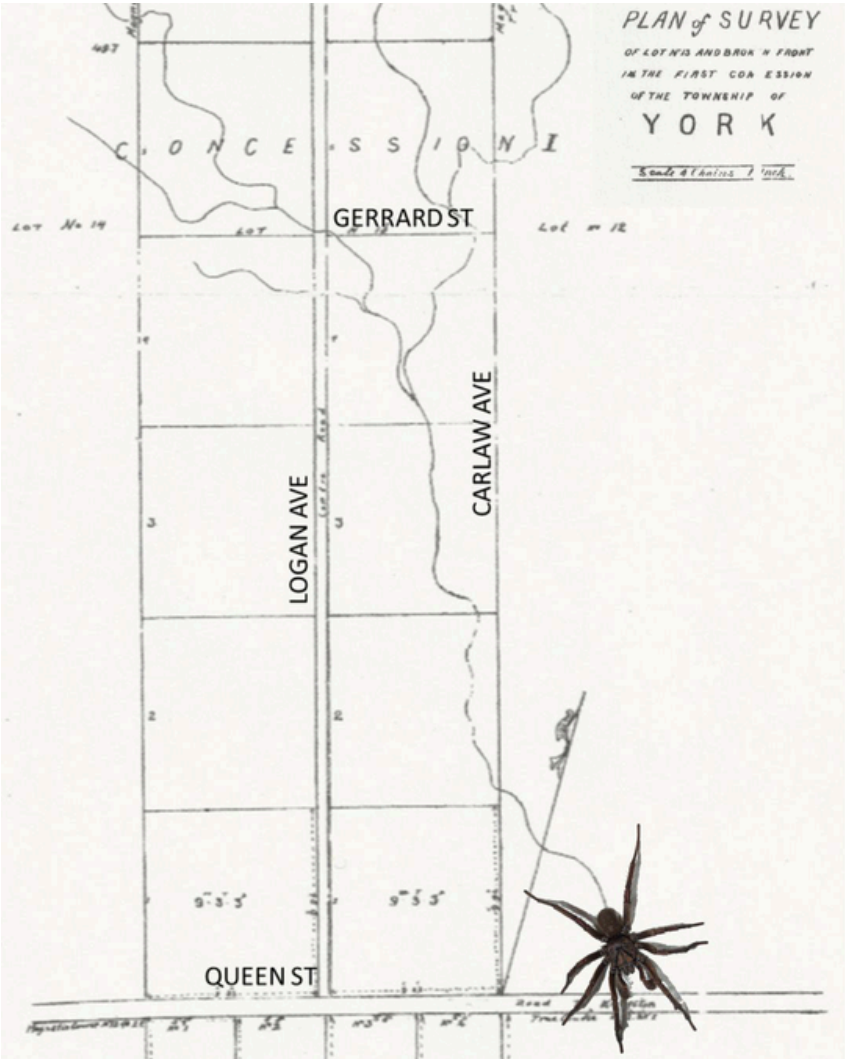
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# Hiding Places

by Catherine Zhang, BA Psychology & English

First place

*Catherine Zhang is a writer and Toronto native. While she has written for various websites, "Hiding Places" is her first stab at fiction. Her influences include Virginia Woolf and Vladimir Nabokov, and she enjoys cycling and baking in her free time.*



Source: Map taken from Canadian HGIS Partnership

The city known for its hideous modern art installations paid for its poor artistic taste when one day they all came to life – on a hot day in the summer, when the city's sins were temporarily forgiven. Soda spilled and ice cream splattered as families fled the famous metal spider sculpture, when it began to crawl, or rather advance, threateningly; the spider found its way to city hall and began spinning a web of wire between the two towers of the building, while police cars and news vans circled below.

The artist collective behind the city's infamous modern art installations held a press conference vowing never to make sculptures of anything scary or disturbing ever again, followed by an announcement that they were pivoting to a new project focused on bunnies and flowers.

The statue of Nike, a war monument, had started a bidding war between defense contractors and a shoe company. The hot-blooded woman wrest herself out of the grasp of engineers and advertising executives, and flew into the sky with the wings her creator had bestowed.

Murals on walls came to life, too; rosy-cheeked children were appalled, when, upon stepping out of their eternal winter wonderland, they found that the beloved local pizzeria had closed down decades ago and was now a gleaming café. They hurried back into the wall, where they could enjoy their greasy slices and fizzy drinks forever.

Chaos erupted at the university, where statues of venerated alumni came to life. Some reanimated scholars burst into the offices of their colleagues, and the hallways rang with heated arguments over medieval literature and bioethics. Others, like acclaimed poet and professor Gorgory Fleck (1914-1982), were fleeing gaggles of professors and students, who demanded clarification of what he meant when he said \*this\* in a 1956 poem, when he said \*that\* in a 1961 lecture, and what the \*true\* nature of his relationship with rival poet Buster Hurst was (“it’s okay now!”).

Gorgory managed to evade the horde, though not without complications. He had a tussle with the police after blowing through the subway turnstiles, and unfortunately for the fare inspectors, the train rolled into the platform at the exact moment Gorgory leapt down the stairs and barreled through the doors opening and closing with a descending triplet of *dings*.

Immediately apprehended upon reaching the street, Gorgory merely hoped that none of the faces peering at him through store windows were pursuing a Masters in English Literature.

Taking advantage of a lapse in the officer's attention (a radio reported that the spider had finished its web), Gorgory ripped out of her grip and sprinted down a side street lined with garbage cans and parked bicycles. An evident tramp knelt at the wheel of one, using some sort of tool to cut through the lock.

Gorgory took off on the rather heavy bicycle; the patsy's indecipherable shouts bounced off his ear. He let out a breath after seeing the police car in the distance, speeding off towards the direction of city hall.

The gleaming newness of the city made no strong impression on Gorgory. He passed through neighbourhoods and scraps of "park," settling ultimately for a suitably green Paul Rechter Park to provide cover.

Perhaps he would turn into a bicycle-stealing wretch, he mused to himself. A better fate than being poked and prodded with the past, which was supposed to have gone with him when he died.

So full was the foliage that Gorgory could not see beyond the turn of the path. An awkwardly shaped corner threw him off his bicycle and the path; he slid down until he reached a thin thread of creek, more pebble than body of water, at the bottom.

He saw that the stream was running into a mysteriously large concrete opening. Sensing promise of cover, Gorgory followed the water in.

Inside, he saw the silhouette of a man peek out from the left. The sight of the man, towering and impassive, reminded Gorgory of something sweetly ancient, a softer time. Of course! It was the statue of the first Indigenous man to graduate from the university. Gorgory was hit by a wave of tenderness – that statue was in the backdrop of many glowing university memories: dashing past when he was terribly late to Latin, but he didn't give a damn, because Buster was running alongside him, laughing, bumping into him, running.

The two shook hands and discovered that both were on the run; John Finch (1840-1902), had found himself inundated with requests to write and read land acknowledgements.

“The university, eh?” was John’s response to Gorgory’s story. “Let me quiz you. Do you know what this tunnel is?”

Gorgory replied that he was a scholar of the arts; John laughed and explained that there used to be a significant river in the area that ran from their current location to Albany Street.

“That’s half the downtown area!” exclaimed Gorgory, a lifelong city-dweller who could only conceive of geographical magnitude in street blocks, or if it came to it, kilometers.

John continued to explain that the rivers were paved over by European colonists to open up more land, and rerouted into underground tunnels, including the one they were standing in now.

“The river used to run through the university,” said John. “Don’t the buildings there flood when it rains?”

Gorgory dug for, and found, a memory of a rainy night, perhaps centuries ago: Gorgory and company moping about having to reschedule *Hamlet* due to heavy rain, Buster and himself tasked with rescuing the props in the basement from flooding. Of course it was too late, and a tug on the light switch revealed lanterns, swords, and Chekhov’s guns floating in muddy water, half-drowned.

Buster, still dressed as Hamlet, leapt into the water, turned onto his back, and mimed Ophelia.

“Buster,” Gorgory reproached, but his friend merely floated in response.

Buster had admittedly imitated the Pre-Raphaelite painting perfectly: half-wet auburn hair, heavy-lidded eyes, parted lips.

Gorgory stepped into the water, waded over to his friend, and bent down.

“They do flood,” Gorgory agreed. “I remember.”

“The rain remembers, even when we forget. But we are in the perfect hiding spot. These tunnels were built for the sole purpose of forgetting what’s in them.”

“Most of the city seems built for the purpose of forgetting,” grumbled Gorgory, recalling that the theatre was gone now, replaced with the proverbial glass house he saw this morning.

A strange thought struck both men: as former statues, coming to life meant that they too would be forgotten. Gorgory remembered John, however, and told, with great enthusiasm, stories about the time he and his friends went about tucking flowers behind the ear of every statue on campus, including John’s, or when they had used John’s statue as a placeholder while rehearsing *A Winter’s Tale*. But John did not remember any of it.

It made Gorgory feel lonely that he was the only one who remembered. There was no one to remember those days with, and the city was so changed, so bereft and disallowing of memory. People died, understandable, but even the places that could conjure up a memory or two had been razed to the ground.

He suddenly became aware of the stream of water burbling under his feet, suddenly wanted to remember, and remembered, all his memories and past pain and happiness; he knelt down by the bank of the river, and kissed the running water, as he did on the opening night of *Hamlet*, a century ago.

# Aanu and I

by E.E., BA English

Honourable  
mention

*E.E. is currently studying English literature at the University of Toronto. She is in her third year.*



The first thing Aanu noticed was the clothes. Then she looked down at herself. A black *borkha* and a large white shawl, draped over her arms, protecting her breasts, falsifying her face. And for the first time, Aanu felt the Stark Difference.

The exposure of the women: the white, brown, black arms; the white, brown, black legs; the white, brown hips; the white, brown knees; the white faces with black sunglasses. These bodies screamed at her, their desires howled, she saw herself swimming in them, and got crushed. So, in soft response, she remembered her mother's face: sweating, crumpled in concentration as the steam from the soft rice wafted up and left drops of condensed water on her dry hair—

Aanu come from Bangladesh. Bangladesh small country no one know about. Small country you not even see on map because so small, but 170 million people and more being born everyday. Some dying too. Most dying.

What Aanu do here? Aanu not know. She know she don't belong here. Aanu not feel real when she walk the street. People see Aanu? Aanu not think so.

When light hit Aanu and Aanu drop shadow, only then Aanu feel real.

*Aanu says, When the light hits, the feeling of being, of occupying space, and the realization that I am capable of movement is intensified. When I see my shadow, I know I am real. For then, I am on the world. The light blinds the eyes and chars the soul.*

*I tired of playing and being multiple identities am. I pussy am. I depressed am. I unbelonged am. I walk these greasy streets, lit by orange light from lampposts gasping for their being throughout the city, crushed under the labels of my own being: woman, brown, Muslim, poor, working class, immigrant, back-home, future-wife, mother-to-be. But I, I is not my labels, man.*

The brownness of my being, Aanu lament it.

Aanu wonder, what this state is. She alienated, she in binary, she not belong, she excluded, she too different, she different even in all her same circles, she share something common with every group she in but never everything. How she fulfill the need of every part of her being without having to go to all the places and all the peoples?

She tell God, *Dear God: tell me, can I arrive mumbling at your mosque, coming from the bar? Drunk and mourning out of my mind, can I collapse in your lap? God? Please?*

What this section of being called? Intersectionality intensified and unbearable? Its ringing high pitch unbearable. Its crude weight unbearable. Why the hell she here, man. And why the hell she so many things. Why not one?

Why is she a mosaic of being? Why is she not one clear glass pane? Why is she so murky and gross?

This slope, rhythm, and dance. In and out. Day in, day in, day in; day out. Dance. Go and come. Wake up and be, The Stark Difference, sleep, The Stark Difference raised from the dead, the Stark Difference weeping at you from every window, making prisoners out of your ears – go, go, go, to school, learn to educate yourself, come, come, come, come home, step through, enter you despised daughter. Come to the second state: collapse.

What the hell, man, Aanu wonder. Why I under so pressure to be good in everything? Why I can fuck up no anywhere? Aanu want liberty to make mistake. Aanu want liberty to fuck up. In fact, that why Aanu here. So she can fuck up. Not to be better human being. But so she can learn to be human in the first place. She know. They will teach her how to be human. She trust them. She give her life to them. And she wonder if she not wrong.

And she want to grab a person in the street and shake them. Yell. Why I un-belong now? Why the extremity push me to the margin? If I go back where I came from, will I belong again? But, she says: *I tried that and it didn't work. Those streets drowned me and suffocated me and sent me gasping on the concrete. They left me shaking on the bed, making mountains out of my back because of my tears. I bent over the edge of that magnificent, skinny, made-of-metal, disgusting bed and vomited into the red bucket. Heard that it was the outpour of the substance of the sins in me.*

*And I remember cowering as she rained down her lily-lined hands, beautiful red paths on the white, pearl palms (like when the milkman by the door, haloed by the golden morning light, dropped the pearl droplets into my mother's jar and I smiled up at him, happy for our sustenance) pearl, pearl, pearl palms on me and slapped me once and slapped me thrice and then I stopped counting 'cause she kept going. They*

*yelled her name – language failed to command, action took its stead – and dragged her away—*

Aanu wonder why she not like her skin. It colour of earth, no? That what her mom told her long time ago, before Aanu left her. And Aanu think of the pretty white girl on the screen throwing back her blonde hair singing about her lover and Aanu feel more lonely than she ever have in her life and she want woman like that to be, but she not. She know she can never be pretty white woman throwing back her blonde hair, singing about her lover.

The free people on the screen always white. Aanu wonder if that why she not free.

And then Aanu got up, laughed, brushed off the dust from her knees, and chased her father anyway, in joyous respite, racing the fantasies of childhood: the mango mass of cousins and the mercury march of hanging from rooftops, prowling like perchers underneath the billowing boughs, the winding whale-road of solar stars and fresh fireflies gasping above us. *“What if fish flew in the sky, Aanu, and fog swam in the sea?”* As a child too light to drop the weight in the world, she was unaware of The Stark Difference; blended into the world, not an unseemly stitch in the fabric of the town.

Aanu and I walk these grey fucking concrete streets, laid down by this weighted sadness of ours, wondering what to do about all our jubilation. Because none of it felt real when we went under and we never knew who we were, and as me and Aanu walked hand in hand, we spent our days merging with the soils of our countries and our lands and our clothes and our beings, and ground ourselves into the dirt like the spices of some ancient village, which has now turned like the ruins of rioters who fell in wells before us, and where the doors yearn by their creaking for someone to come in and embrace them. And when Aanu and I walk the streets of night, we cried inside hunched over our wooden tiled floors, we cut ourselves and our arms bled, and we sent quick-footed letters to the forward chariots of Ancient Greek heroes begging them to save us by their golden hue and red plumes, and as we cascaded down the bed and gripped ourselves, and faced into our palms, our fingers grieved for the language out of our grasp: to tell and to be understood. The desire to put a name to everything.

Man, you ain't know shit.

Man, you ain't know shit, by Aanu and me. With these nights bowing to us, bending to fit under our feet, folding beneath us, we walk these plague-infested streets and cry our arms by blood and narrate the words of hip hop without their beats, wondering if we'll ever make it somewhere, find some place else in which to be, a place where I am (that which I am), a place to embody the centricity of my soul, a place where the clanging skeleton within me will not scream as I stand on some field, stomach exposed, back arched, hands over my head staring down at the town below because I pray for it. I pray for it.

Man, you ain't know shit.

# The American Dream

by Eryn McDevitt, BA Environmental Studies & Urban Studies

Honourable  
mention

*Eryn grew up in a small town with her brother, Oliver – the family cockapoo. Oliver wasn't much for conversation, so she turned to writing as an escape. Today, her work is inspired by cinema and an increasingly dystopian reality. This is her first short story.*



The air was yellowish and thick with smog, and the water below the dock was dark and foamy, full of trash, and slick with oil. Yet, as Bogdin Xavier took his first step off the boat he'd sailed on across the Atlantic and planted his scuffed shoes onto the New York City Marina, he felt an overwhelming sense of optimism, for today was the day he would become an American Citizen.

As Bogdin surveyed the area, his eyes landed on a weathered sign, "Immigration services – North, 2 Miles." That gave him just 30 minutes to reach his 11 a.m. appointment. Wasting no time, he marched down the maze of boardwalks. Bogdin was the kind of man who believed being right on time was too late. As much as he longed to explore the city, it would have to wait – for he had a very important meeting at a very important building.

How curious, he thought as he trekked along; Manhattan seemed much different than the glorious city he had seen in the brochures. Tall glass buildings stood in the distance, but his surroundings were not so much skyscrapers as they were metal crates piled upon each other as if waiting for a gust of wind to send them crashing down into the murky waters. The streets were crowded with people, but the chatter was unexcited. The locals' tattered clothing and tired faces were a stark contrast to the lively Manhattan Bogdin had imagined for so long. Still, his hope did not wane.

You see, when Bogdin's home country was invaded, he lost everything. Forced to live on the streets and take shelter in the rubble each night. But the day he received the notice in the mail, everything changed. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in New York, promising immigrants free housing and jobs. It was a dream, and he was determined to see it become reality.

At precisely 10:59 AM the Department of Migratory Affairs' art deco facade came upon Bogdin, and the large wrought iron doors swung open. The interior was barren, save for a single windowed cubicle standing not five feet away. Bogdin moved confidently toward the window where a woman equally as plain as the room sat working at a desk. Setting aside his briefcase, Bogdin outstretched his hand before noticing the glass barrier and retracting his hand to his side.

"Good morning," he said brightly. "My name is Bogdin Xavier, and I am here to enroll in the New American Citizens Program."

The woman looked up slowly. “Xavier, you said? Is that... eastern?” she asked, raising a brow.

Bogdin frowned. Did she mean east of America? Or just east of west? And in that case, whose west? “Y-Yes,” he replied, though unsure of what she meant.

The woman said nothing more and turned to the stack of papers before her, striking the page with her pen.

Bogdin cleared his throat, still determined. “I was hoping you could help me—I’ve come a very long way—”

The woman cut him off with an exasperated sigh. “If you wish to enroll in the program, the borough of Manhattan requires you to live and work within one of our seven districts. Assignments are based on skill, though preference may be taken into consideration. You will contribute to the social and economic balance by being a productive member of society. You will not receive wages, but accommodations and food stamps will be provided.” The woman recited as if from a script she’d memorized years ago. “Do you accept these terms?”

Bogdin hesitated. He had been under the impression that the New American Citizens Program meant he would receive citizenship and housing, but these additional terms were unexpected. No matter. To live anywhere in the great country of America would surely suffice, and so he replied, “I do.”

The woman continued, “The seven districts were established to maintain order within the city. As you saw upon your arrival, the Marina is our southernmost district. Here, the community handles transport and cargo ships, as well as fishing. West of the Marina is the Waste Sorting and Materials District. Due to flooding, the buildings in these districts are built on stilts so I suggest you avoid them if you dislike heights or water. Do you have any experience fishing?”

Bogdin’s brows furrowed. Had the shantytown he passed through been a District? He had grown up fishing almost daily back home, but he hadn’t come to America to continue living in disrepair.

“I do not know how to fish, and I am not fond of heights,” he fibbed.

The woman nodded, “Well then, that leaves the Central Park and Garment Districts.”

“Pardon me, ma’am, but I thought you said there were seven districts – that’s only four,” Bogdin stammered.

The woman scoffed. “There are seven. However, the district you are in now is Central – home to government workers and professionals. North Manhattan is the Peacekeeping Corps, and seeing as you are not... from here... these are both out of the question. And, of course, it goes without saying that the Upper East District is not an option for you. Most *real* Americans couldn’t even live there.”

For the first time, Bogdin felt uneasy. When he had set out on this journey, he was so certain that America would offer him opportunity and prosperity.

“And what of the Garment and Central Park districts?” he questioned, praying they were better options.

“The Central Park District is just west of here, you’d be living on the outskirts of the agricultural land growing crops and tending to the livestock. The garment district is responsible for designing and manufacturing materials.”

Bogdin’s face fell. “I-I don’t know how to farm or sew,” he admitted in defeat.

The woman narrowed her eyes at him.

“But – I’m a quick learner, if someone can teach me, I will be a productive member of society,” he pleaded.

The woman stood slowly, her shadow now looking down upon him. Suddenly the air in the room felt stifling.

“Well then Bogdin—” she started, tone suddenly laced with intrigue, “I’m afraid there’s no place for you here.” She smiled at him for the first time, but it was far from welcoming. Bogdin took a step back. The wry grin on her face grew as she reached toward something on her desk. His heart pounded and a frightened expression replaced his merriment.

“Please—I swear I will be a productive member of society, I swear it.” He cried out.

But before he could protest further he stumbled backward, tripping over his briefcase, the bag’s contents spilling out in the process. There he lay with all his remaining possessions scattered across the marble tile. His last few bills, postcards from New York, and his passport – its navy cover and metallic lettering unmistakably European.

The woman’s eyes flickered. “Ah. Mr. Xavier I apologize, there seems to have been a misunderstanding. I’m sure we will have no problem finding a place for you here after all,” she beamed.

And without further remark, she settled back into her seat behind the window.

# Sylvie

by Noah Khan, PhD candidate Social Justice Education

First place

*Noah researches the role of emotion in artificial intelligence development, examining how experiences of love, grief, fear, etc., shape the construction of the latest technologies. He is also a Recognised Student at the Oxford Internet Institute and a Visiting Assistant in Research at Yale University.*



I engage in the art of tree tallying. Formally, I'm the Assistant Deputy Undersecretary for Arboreal Quantification and Statistical Sylviculture. It's a bit of a lonely job, though someone has to do it. Otherwise, how would we know if there were enough trees? Enough trees. I've thought about what that number might be for quite some time now. I think a lot of things. I'm glad you're here.

Thirteen days ago, I was a bit slow on my perambulation – I like to say I perambulate. One might walk; I perambulate. So I was perambulating in Jaipur, where I've been tabulating – I like to say I tabulate. One might count; I tabulate. So I was perambulating and tabulating, as I do, and I came upon this specimen you see here.

Assist me, would you? Is it a tree? A sapling? A sprig? A sprout? A shoot? Perhaps a mere twig? We must be precise in our designations, you see. The future of our forests rests in fine lines! (Or perhaps I'm overthinking things again, as is my wont.) What say you? How shall we categorize this ... *arboreal entity*?

I was up for promotion, you see, to Deputy Undersecretary for Arboreal Quantification and Statistical Sylviculture, and my supervisor put this question to me. He's a gruff fellow, a big bearded individual quite taken to moralizing and snapping his pencils whilst defending the value of trees. Three pencils were in half on his desk when I had arrived on a stormy morning, drenched. As a result of my soggy condition I was not offered a seat, so I stood at the door of his cramped office watching him flip through images of trees I had taken on an old projector screen. He stopped on Specimen 17.

From his expression, I was aware that the pencil he was pointing with would soon sunder. "Assistant Deputy Undersecretary! What do you call this?!" Before I could open my mouth, I heard a snap as he declaimed, "The data depends on it!"

"With all due respect, sir, the data *depend* on it." He made what I would call a burbling sound, as if he were perhaps boiling; I added, "This specimen is but a datum, of which many might readily be called *data*." A few moments of excruciating silence later, I hastened to append, "Surely, a matter of such import deserves grammatical precision!" He grunted, a sound akin to a grizzly bear awakening from a nap.

“Don’t get smart with me, Assistant Deputy Undersecretary,” he growled, stabbing at the photo again with a pencil I could’ve sworn he conjured into existence. “This ... *thing* ... is causing a discrepancy in our projections. Sector 7, Quadrant 5 is showing a significant deficit in young arboreal specimens. This,” he stabbed the photo again, “could throw off the entire regional forestry plan! Call it a sapling, damn it!”

“I mean absolutely no offense, sir,” I ventured, “perhaps the issue lies not with the specimen, but with our definitions. I had submitted a plan for major definitional revisions a few weeks ago, though perhaps you haven’t seen it as yet. Is it not possible that this specimen, while not yet reaching the arbitrary height requirement for ‘mature tree’ status, might readily be called an ‘arboreal adolescent?’”

He blinked, a flicker of confusion crossing his rough features. “Adolescent? You’ve got one entry in that column, another in ‘foliar fledgling,’ and two more in...” – a sigh slowly vented from his mouth, drooped low. To have at least exhausted his thunderous roaring was a victory for me – he continued, “. . . ‘pre-pubescent photosynthetic personage?’”

“Simply put, sir, perhaps by focusing solely on mature trees, saplings, and other common categories, we’ve missed out on developing infrastructures of support for trees of all ages. You’ll see I’ve placed a stake as a support for Specimen 17, though how will we know how many stakes to order if we haven’t a clue how many of these specimens there are!?”

He stared at me for a moment, then let out a low chuckle. “Stakes...I’ll tell you about stakes, Assistant Deputy Undersecretary. If we don’t hit our sapling numbers this quarter, there’s no funding to cover your promotion! Let me ask you a question. You like this ... philosophy ... If a sapling is planted in the forest and ... and no one’s there to count it! You know the rest! What then?”

What was the rest? I had never once indicated to my supervisor that I liked philosophy. I do not like philosophy. “Sir! Th-th-the sapling ought to have been automatically counted through an extrapolation based on the rate at which other saplings have been placed and the discrepancy between observed and unobserved saplings.”

“Observe this sapling!” He threw half of his pencil at the projector screen, wobbling the image. For a second there, it had really looked like a sapling. I informed him that I could not mislabel a specimen, for my conscience would not allow it. “Your conscience doesn’t change facts. And the fact is, we need more trees. Little trees. Trees that fit the definition. The data needs more saplings.”

“*Need, sir.*”

If you’re wondering, I didn’t get the promotion. I wish I could tell you that the episode with my supervisor was important, that it was a story, with a beginning, middle, and an end. Everyone I know is fond of closure, though I don’t see the appeal. When you tabulate, you just keep going.

When I write reports, my supervisor often complains that they lack narrative structure. The officials need to know where we started, what we’re doing, and what’s coming next. But Specimen 17 ... Specimen 17 is not a story. Specimen 17 is just in between the lines ... waiting.

I feel like that sometimes. Every evening, at the end of my perambulation and tabulation, I sit for a while with Specimen 17. I wonder whether it counts ... I wonder whether it tabulates. As I clean up a few bottles and other sundry items I want to scream to the city below that Specimen 17 exists. That I exist. But I don’t.

The product of my life’s work is a fiction. A fiction that there are  $x$  mature trees and  $y$  saplings. The fiction perambulates into a report, into an office, into an archive full of the data that I am, into a story you’ll read and think perhaps you knew what it was like to be on this very mountain counting this very tree, but you don’t. That experience is in between the lines waiting for the columns to collapse. The endless, endless columns. Why did I make so many columns?

Questions like these plague me, though when I’m with Specimen 17 I feel a small reprieve. I watch the sun dip below the city, a quiet witness to a world still trying to fit into columns and rows. The wind rustles through Specimen 17’s leaves, a soft susurration, almost like a voice. It’s my mother, it’s my supervisor, it’s everyone between. I close my eyes and hope it names me, hope it bestows me a new title, hope it gives me something to hold on to. In all my selfishness, I was still looking for a datum. I still am. I hope that the next phrase brings us to a close that we could call satisfying, that we could call complete. Maybe then, I could call this a story.

# Chongjin Bicycles

by Steve Tu, PhD Leadership, Higher & Adult Education

Honourable  
mention

*Steve's SSHRC and Digital Research Alliance of Canada-funded research explores the multispecies entanglements of campus green spaces. He has been to North Korea twice.*



They glide in silence, the bicycles rattling softly over uneven pavement. The man's hair lifts and tosses as he pedals, his breath visible in the crisp air. The woman rides beside him, her hands pale on the handlebars, her facemask slipping loose. They don't speak. There's no need. Their breath and motion keep time, a quiet rhythm in the spacious courtyard.

The sun is a thin golden smudge against the washed-out North Korean sky. The air carries the scent of coal smoke, faint but inescapable, as it always does. The city moves around them – people bundled in heavy coats, walking with measured urgency – but in this brief stretch of space, they are alone.

A sign looms in the background, red-on-white and imposing, its message a perpetual reminder that it's war time. The words themselves are hardly the point. The sign's presence is enough.

The man reaches for the woman's wrist as they coast forward, his fingers brushing wool. She doesn't pull away. Their bicycles tilt slightly toward one another, an unconscious gravity. There is no laughter, only breath and the sound of tires against concrete.

At the edge of the courtyard, near a row of shuttered shops, an old man watches them from a wooden stool. His hands are gnarled, cracked with cold, folded over a walking stick. He has been sitting there for as long as they have been riding, maybe longer. Maybe forever. His eyes are the colour of time.

She is the first to notice him watching, and nods slightly in his direction. The man on the bicycle beside her follows her gaze. The old man doesn't smile. Nor does he frown. He only looks. Then, slowly, deliberately, he raises a hand from his walking stick and gestures toward the bicycles. A small, tired motion.

Neither of them understands the act. Is it approval? A warning? A simple acknowledgment? They don't stop to ask. The bicycles carry them past him, wheels humming, past the closed doors and boarded windows, past the watching sign, past everything that means something and means nothing.

Later, when the bicycles are locked away, when the sun has sunk and the coal smoke has thickened, the woman speaks.

“Did you see him?”

The man nods. He has not stopped thinking about the old man's face. The way it was neither kind nor unkind, as though he had seen too much to be either.

"He knew something," she says, her voice quiet.

"Maybe."

The kettle on the stove clicks, beginning to boil. The sound is familiar and comforting. Outside, the wind rises.

"I had a dream last night," the woman says. "I was riding, but the bicycle had no wheels. It just kept moving. I couldn't stop. The ground vanished, but I kept going and going."

The man watches her, waiting. She shrugs, as if to shake off the thought, and turns to the kettle. He hears the slight tremor in the porcelain as she pours the water.

They don't speak of the old man again. But he lingers.

Days pass. The bicycles rest outside their apartment, cold metal stiffening with frost. They don't ride again for a long time, though the mornings are still bright, and the afternoons still hold that sharp clarity of late autumn. The bicycles remain untouched.

Then one morning, the old man is gone. His stool is empty. The space where he sat feels oddly hollow, as though something essential has been removed. The air is stark with his absence.

The woman stands beside the bicycles, gloved hands in her pockets. "Maybe he was never there."

"He was."

"Where did he go?"

The answer is impossible. The answer is everything. The answer is silence.

That evening, she dreams again. The same dream. The bicycle without wheels,

moving, unmoored. This time, she is not alone. The man rides beside her, and the old man watches from the edge of something she can't name.

She wakes with the taste of wind in her mouth. The room is dark, except for the thin spill of light from the Dear Leaders' statues across the empty street. The man beside her stirs, sensing something, but doesn't wake.

In the morning, the bicycles are gone.

They couldn't have been stolen. No one would dare. Whatever happened to them, they've disappeared.

The woman touches the empty space where hers had been. The metal chill that should have been there is missing, a ghost of cold against her palm.

"Do you remember riding?" she asks.

The man looks at her. "Yes."

"Do you?" she asks again.

His brows furrow. The wind stirs dust across the courtyard.

She turns, looking toward where the old man had sat. The stool remains empty.

She looks back at the man.

"We should go inside," he says.

She nods. They step back into the warmth, the smell of coal in the air, heavier than usual.

The bicycles are never found. The old man is never seen again. The sign still watches, though neither of them ever stops to read it.

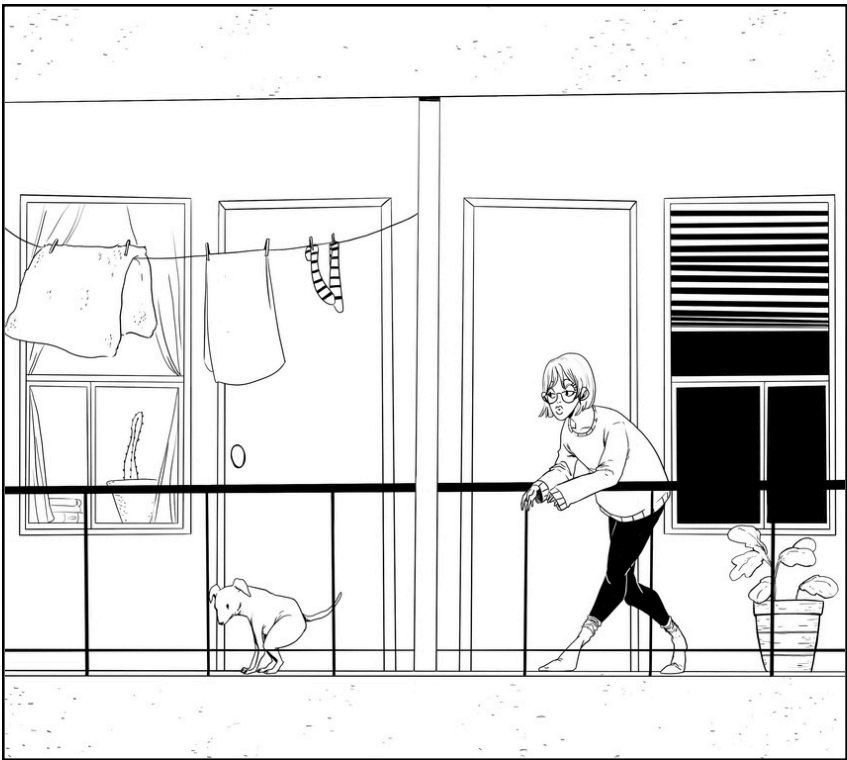
In the nights that follow, the woman dreams of motion. Of bicycles that are not bicycles, of wind that is not wind. Of riding toward something she can't see, and of the man beside her, pedaling forward, into the space where the road should be.

# Cammie and the Coyote

by Kevin Corcoran, Master of Information Library and Information Science

Honourable mention

*Kevin is a recent library school graduate who spends his time baking bread and reading comic books. He used to help produce cartoons for pre-schoolers, and sometimes acts like one. He lives with his partner and two cats, who always keep him on his toes.*



Cammié first heard about the coyote from a neighbour down the hall – a sexagenarian woman whom Cammié had only ever seen wearing pyjama pants patterned with images of disembodied Muppet heads. She did not know the woman’s name, but knew she had a tiny white dog with a shrill bark and matted fur. The woman told Cammié that she was no longer taking the dog on walks for fear of being chased by the coyote, and the dog now peed and pooped exclusively on her fourth floor balcony. It quickly became clear that the woman had never actually seen the coyote herself, but had heard of it, for her part, in a building-wide meeting to which Cammié, as far as she knew, hadn’t been invited. A representative from the city was in attendance, the woman said, and told all residents with dogs that they should practice extreme caution when perambulating through the neighbourhood, and especially when cutting through the nearby park. “Keep your head on a swivel,” advised the city worker.

“It has no fear.”

Cammié didn’t have a dog, but she had a cat which was not allowed outside and therefore was in no particular danger, aside from those perils that existed as a matter of course: choking, drowning in the toilet, landing wrong after jumping off the top of the bookshelf. Nevertheless, when she looked at her cat – whose name was Furby and whom she loved dearly – curled into a perfect circle, his tiny body gently rising and falling in the afternoon sun, she couldn’t help but see images of carnage behind her eyes. She knew the coyote was just an animal, but she also decided it was a villain. She imagined it as if it were a bad guy in the cartoon version of Robin Hood, descending upon Sherwood Forest’s foxes and birds as they danced around the maypole, tearing them to bits. She couldn’t remember if that image resembled anything close to a scene from the film, but she decided it didn’t matter. It also didn’t matter that no dogs had actually been killed or even hurt by the coyote. What mattered was that it was *there*. It didn’t belong there. Cammié knew it, her neighbours knew it, even the coyote knew it, or so she assumed. So why wasn’t anyone doing anything about it?

To be clear, Cammié, of course, wasn’t going to be the one to do anything about it. She wasn’t a fighter, and certainly wasn’t a hunter or trapper. Still, she thought about the coyote a lot. She thought about it when she sat on her balcony and looked over to see the white dog squatting, suspended 50 feet in the air. She thought about it every time she looked at Furby and her chest tightened with the realization that life was such a small and weak thing, so ready to be snipped away

like a fair hair between barber shears. Weeks passed as she thought, and washed dishes, and shopped, and poured coffee, and hugged loved ones.

When her mother called, Cammie tried not to talk about the coyote but couldn't stop herself. "It might be a coywolf," Cammie suggested, based on nothing. "Wolves and coyotes can interbreed. The only thing keeping them apart is geography: wolves like forests, coyotes like plains."

"Uh huh," said her mother, who wanted nothing more than a grandchild. "Do they mate for life?"

Then, one day, while rushing home under grey skies, carrying a clamshell container full of chicken katsu curry, she saw it. She wasn't sure at first – it was smaller than she expected it to be. It looked more or less like a dog, not the bane of dogs, not the monster she had built up in her imagination. She thought it would be snarling and spitting, rabid and bloodthirsty, but it just stood there, frozen, about 15 feet away, naked feet on the cold sidewalk. It looked like a scattering of triangles, like board game pieces thrown on the floor during a child's tantrum. She clutched her katsu curry to her body, as though the coyote was about to reach out and snatch it from her. Unwilling to take her eyes off the coyote even for a moment, she couldn't tell whether there was anyone else nearby to come to her rescue. She considered screaming, but found the thought of it embarrassing. Then she met its orange eyes and knew it was unlike any animal she had seen before.

In its eyes she could see moss and carrion and bits of dust and ash dancing in shafts of sunlight. She could see pups crawling over one another in a dirt floor den, a stone living room. She could see every coyote that came before it, slinking between thick trees and pouncing on rabbits. She looked around it and saw the concrete organism that pushed and pulled at it, swallowing it up along with everything it had ever known and spitting it back out onto its belly. Cammie reached into the past, but, finding nothing to grasp, was pulled back into the grey now.

The city worker had said that the coyote had no fear, but in that moment she knew this wasn't true. The coyote had *only* fear. She wanted to call out to it but couldn't think of anything true to say. She hoped the coyote would say something to *her*, but she knew if it spoke she would find its accent indecipherable.

A minute passed in silence, then two, then a hundred years. Cammie was a crone with bony knees, but the coyote didn't age a day. Then it turned and ran, crossing the road, and disappearing into the park.

Cammie realized she had been holding her breath and inhaled sharply. Where moments ago there was only silence, the sounds of the city came rushing back to her ears as though a giant bubble surrounding her had popped. In the distance she heard both boisterous laughter and, simultaneously, a mournful wail. She was starving.

Cammie ran home, the traffic lights parting cars in her path like the waters of the Red Sea.



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