

On the Verge Writing Contest 2023, Second-Place Non-Fiction Winner

By Jade Wildey

Amber Ray: Girl in Glass

Desperation is quite unbecoming for a girl. Eight texts and three missed calls? She's crazy. I'm crazy.

Maybe it's problematic that our relationship started on the basis of financial banking metaphors. At the time, it was romantic. We were both nerds about that sort of thing, I mean we both wound up as half business majors. *"Hypothetically, a client walks into a bank..."* Never directly stating what we wanted or what we felt but coming to our own understanding of each other anyway. Both of our resumes even state that we're passionate about "seeking creative solutions to problems on the fly" and our version of sexting is built on charts and graphs and numbers.

Twenty-seven hours since she's said anything. Thirteen months and two days since we decided to be girlfriends. Four years of friendship. Third girl to give her the same damn Christmas present.

I'll always love a long, twisted metaphor, pushing it until the edges crack open and reality bleeds through. Except I can't help but wince at the resonance of banking as a transaction. *Two Week Notice* is my favourite break up song, because sometimes I really do feel like falling in love with me feels like a job to her and I don't know why she signed up for a nine-to-five if she wanted to freelance. And if I'm not physically there, what real value do I have? There's nothing I can do from seven-hundred-and-twelve kilometers away except send song lyrics and stolen poetry instead of my own words.

How does one comfort their girlfriend after her parents rip through her room after returning from a six-month vacation to Palm Springs and discover her identity? How am I supposed to bridge the divide between us if she won't pick up the phone? How can I expect her to explain her struggles to me when she doesn't even fully understand them herself? How can I fight for her when all she wants to do is hide?

On December sixth, nineteen-eighty-nine, fourteen women in engineering were shot and killed by a man in the Montreal Massacre. Thirteen more injured. He screamed as he shot them, degrading them for being feminists, for their very existence as women. He threatened to kill nineteen more "had he not run out of time." She shares a name with one of the women killed that day.

In middle school, we had a mandatory class called "Go Girls" (I went to an all-girls charter school), wherein we were supposed to be taught how to be strong independent women, and how to manage our emotions and respect the Leaders of Feminism that came before us. Emphasis there on *supposed* to, because really it was the class where we got to fuck around and do whatever we wanted or force-fed empty idealist statements and platitudes until we

were allowed to eat lunch. By the time I was thirteen, I'd grown to resent the concept of feminism entirely and was actively disinterested in the concept of gender equality and struggle. *"It's twenty-sixteen, this stuff doesn't happen anymore, right?"*

It's twenty-sixteen and a fully grown man catcalls me three blocks from my house in the suburbs on my way to Starbucks. It's twenty-nineteen when she's late meeting me for dinner downtown, and a passerby makes sure to tell me I have "really nice legs" in the dress I wore in an attempt to impress her. It's twenty-twenty-three and now when a man rolls down his truck window to shout at me in the street or pulls over beside me on my way home in the dark I hardly blink. I tell my friends the story on the phone later and we all say, *"god that's terrible!"* and laugh it off. I try not to say that I hate all boys, but I have yet to meet one that that I am safe around.

The boys she's grown up with laugh at her when she changes her name in the group-chat. She walks past anti-trans protests on her way home from school. Her peers in engineering consist of a pitiful handful of cis-girls and a sea of Calgary-conservative-cowboy-women-hating-hockey-boys. Snide comments, off-hand remarks, again and again and again. She tells me the stories on the phone later and it feels like a punch in the face. She tells herself they're right.

I can't help but think of John Green's remark that "pain is the opposite of language" and the opening passage of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* where she considers the capacity for language to express and whether or not it is enough. Because pain—and love—elude direct description, you can't describe them properly without metaphor or simile or comparison. I love her and yet I continually fail to understand and fully grasp her pain. I love her and yet I continually fail to convey my adoration and admiration in any way that connects in her mind. In so many ways she is lost to me even when there is less than a millimetre between us.

"in a perfect world, what would you do; who would you be?"

"I don't want to be worried or stressed or have to hide something or feel like it's wrong and bad to exist a certain way or just generally destroy my confidence in myself or what I'm proud of and what other people like about me or make myself feel less than everyone around me because I'm not the same or not be good looking or not respected or dismissed or contrary or different. I'm sorry"

It's too much.

So after twenty-eight hours, the silence isn't so bad—till I look at my hands and feel sad, because the spaces between my fingers are right where hers fit perfectly. I tell myself that we'd be okay if we could talk about it, and I resent the world for making our lives so difficult. She deserves to be herself, to feel peace and acceptance and love. I want to tell her that she doesn't have to know what to say or what to think, she doesn't have to be anybody she can never be. Stolen phrases because mine aren't enough.

I don't want to be reduced to just another number to her. I can't bear to think that our love story—however painfully messy, drawn out, confusing—can be diminished to something so lacklustre. A million moments like a million stars, an uncountable infinity; it's too alive to be a statistic. I think of the shooting, I think of her brilliant mind and heart and her golden-hour sunshine smile. The loss envelops me like an ocean and I can't breathe anymore. Fourteen women killed thirty-three years ago because the world is cruel and misogynist and violent, my love lost in constant rejection and heartbreak and hatred, and I am here now, alone, hands tied, stuck.

"I watch [her] leave, and for a second there's a feeling in the air that's familiar, but scares me every time. A feeling like a minute ago my insides were snug, every little thing slotted exactly in its place... and as soon as that door closed one big piece went missing, and now everything's a little colder, a little looser."

Hypothetically, a client walks into a bank and she sits on a faded plastic chair and she waits. She waits until her eyes cross and her ass goes numb, she waits until her thought patterns are as recursive as the hands on the clock hanging on the wall, she waits.