

Youth Short Story Category – 1st Prize 2021

PERMANENCE

By Kai Easterbrook

The morning air kisses Maisie’s cheeks as she walks through the frost, leaving a trail of footprints behind her. The world is quiet and still, save for a small child of seven years old. Her dark blonde hair is wet with dew. She does not know how long she has been outside, but it’s been long enough to watch the sunrise chase away the darkness of the night and bathe the world in shades of orange.

Maisie’s feet come to a stop. Her hazel eyes have caught on something moving in the grass, and she squats down to study the small creature. A tiny frog, or perhaps a toad, stares back up at her. He is covered with brown mud and golden sand, but when Maisie leans down to brush some of the mess off his back, the little frog hops away. “Hey,” says Maisie, but the frog does not stop.

Curious, she attempts to follow the small critter. He gives away his position by moving the grass as he hops across the garden. They walk for a brief period of time until the roaring sound of the waterfall drowns out the silence. The little frog dives into the water, leaving

Maisie standing on the riverbank. Her eyes are drawn towards the waterfall.

Admittedly, it's not the most impressive she's seen. When Maisie was four, her father showed her a picture of the Great Blondin crossing Niagara Falls on a tightrope. Since then, Maisie has found most other waterfalls are dwarfed in comparison.

She holds her arms out wide, much like a bird stretches its wings, and presses her left heel to the toe of her right foot. Forward, Maisie walks, without wobbling once. The mud squishes underneath her bare feet, and her pale skin is stained with brown. It's cold and squishy, and it feels wonderful. Her toe hits something, and Maisie lifts her foot to see a small, white pebble. She reaches down and shoves it into her pocket without hesitation, then continues to walk by the side of the riverbank.

"I'm on a tightrope," Maisie tells the frog, who has long since disappeared into the small river. "I'm crossing Niagara Falls. I have a cow on my back."

A bird tweets as an answer to her statement, and Maisie lets her arms drop to the side to stare up at the lush green trees. "Don't take that tone with me," she says, mimicking the voice of her mother.

If Maisie looks hard enough, she can see the tree branches moving right before all of the birds around her burst into song. Suddenly, the forest is alive with creatures, and even the small waterfall has been drowned out by the voices and movement of the animals around her. Birds flutter and sing – frogs croak and swim. A kangaroo bounds past with a little joey tucked tightly into its pouch, and a large possum blinks at her from a tree before he opens his mouth and lets out a noise comparable to grinding gears. Maisie covers her ears with her palms, aware that she is staining mud all over her face and hair.

The forest is alive – and Maisie is alive with it when she opens her mouth and sings along. She is part of the animals, part of the world. Maisie's heart is pumping, her lungs are screaming, and her body is numb from the cold, but she feels like a human again after so long of being a monster.

Temporary, her father taught her last year. The lack of permanence – something that will not stick around forever. The word echoes in Maisie's head, and she lets her voice slowly grow

quiet until she is sucking in large breaths of air in an effort to rebuild herself.

Lots of things are temporary. Is everything temporary? Maisie takes a moment to ponder on this thought, sitting down in the mud with a splat as she does so. Can she think of a single thing that has stuck around forever? Her father was temporary. Her mother is temporary. The frog, the birds, the possum, the kangaroo and its joey, they were all temporary.

Maisie's eyes are drawn towards the running water, and without even meaning to, she sticks her hand underneath the waterfall. It's cold, cold enough that it feels like it's hot, and Maisie yanks her hand back with wide eyes.

Is water permanent?

Back when Maisie went to school, her teacher said that water turns into mist, and is sucked up in the clouds and rained back down on them. Olaf from Frozen 2 said water has passed through animals before, and the fact is enough to make Maisie's face scrunch up in disgust. She also knows that turtles can breathe through their butts, but there are no turtles that she can see and that means the fact isn't important to her right now. She's sure it will be in the future. Everything she has learned from Frozen 2 is important.

Maybe Frozen 2 is permanent, thinks Maisie as she runs her hand back under the water and lets it turn her skin red. The wind stings harshly at her face, and for a second Maisie wonders if she'll be turned to ice. It's cold enough for her to have a frozen heart.

Maisie stands up and sticks her wet hand into the pocket of her jeans. The sun is up higher now, and rays of sunlight are starting to shine through the tree branches. She takes one last look at the waterfall, hoping to see the frog, and decides it's time to head home.

Coming back to the town fills Maisie with a sense of dread. By the time she's standing back in her overgrown garden, the sounds of the town are loud in her ears. Car horns beep, people yell in the house next door, and dogs bark. The fresh smell of the forest is replaced with oil. Maisie pushes open the back door quietly, listening as the creeek of the door echoes through the house.

I want to be back in the forest. I want to live in the forest. Maisie hesitates for a moment before thinking, I want to be the forest.

The house is not permanent. Maisie knows this because it's their third one since her dad left, and though its opening into wildlife provides her with ecstasy, that feeling is quickly overrun by the lack of permanence. She longs for something to stay with her, even if it's something she dislikes.

Maisie's hand closes over the pebble in her pocket, and she pulls it out to study it. There are grey speckles scattered through the white, and when Maisie wipes the mud from the other side away, she's surprised to see a pattern on it. The grey looks like it could be a butterfly, or maybe even a person with their arms stretched out like wings. It reminds Maisie of the days she used to gaze upon clouds with her mum and dad. Before her dad left and her mum changed.

Mum would like this, thinks Maisie. She clutches the pebble tighter in her hand and stares at the closed bedroom door next to the laundry. There was a time when Maisie's mother was surrounded in swirls of colours. When Red Hot Chilli Peppers was played in her studio every second of the day, when blue and green and purple streaked her mother's white face. Before her teeth were brown, before her hair was gone. Before Maisie's dad left and before Maisie's mum ran from doctors like a rabbit runs from a fox. The difference was, Maisie's mother was running towards death, and not away from it. Maisie does not know what death is, but she wonders if it is permanent.

Maisie's mother used to say that the world was her canvas. Maisie would travel the farm with their father, looking for rocks and wood for her mother to paint on. When they returned, they would dump pebbles on the floor and her mother would smile.

With steady, deciding movement, Maisie pushes open her mother's bedroom door and steps into the darkness. The room is filled with a tickling, sour scent, and it grows stronger when Maisie steps closer to the bed. Instead of a person, her mother just looks like a lump. She stirs when Maisie sticks her mud covered face right next to the pillow.

"Maze..." Maisie's mother grumbles, covering her eyes and rolling over. Maisie crawls onto the bed beside her, shaking her mother's shoulder.

"I found you a pebble, mum," says Maisie. "I found it near the river when I was walking on a tightrope." She presses the butterfly person pebble into her mother's cold hand.

“You were not walking a tightrope,” comes the tired answer, but her hand closes over the pebble all the same. Maisie gets more comfortable, wriggling under the blankets and pressing up against her mother. For a second, it’s the lady who had blue on her face, who played Red Hot Chilli Peppers and painted on pebbles. For a moment, Maisie feels like she’s six again, even though she’s seven and two months. For a moment, Maisie is not a monster and her mother painting pebbles and Maisie’s dad didn’t leave when Maisie’s mum got sick.

“Is there anything...” Maisie whispers, “That’s permanent, mum?”

“No,” says her mother. Her chest has slowed down. “Not a single thing. Not a single thing, Maze. You remember that.”

“Not one?”

“Not one.”

Maisie looks down and presses her ear against her mother’s chest. Ba dump, ba dump, ba dump, says her heartbeat. Ba dump, ba dump... Ba dump.

“Something’s wrong,” says Maisie’s mother. Maisie nods, because she doesn’t know what else to do.

The pebble tumbles onto the mattress, and her mother’s heart lets out a heaving whine. Ba dump, says her heartbeat. Ba... Dump...

“Ba dump,” Maisie says back. She sits up, taking the pebble off the mattress and turning it over in her hand. Her mother’s chest has stopped moving. “Mum?” Maisie asks. “What about this? This isn’t permanent, right?”

Her mother does not answer, and Maisie’s heart is still saying ba dump, but she doesn’t feel like she’s alive.

The pebble feels heavier.