

Liminality

By Kate Knowles

Bachelor of Communication Studies

Year 4

Summary of Creative Project: (creative fiction short story)

I read Dionne Brand's book *Love Enough* very quickly, (when I eventually could buy a copy) and one of the things that I liked was the way different groups of people could have stories that intersected, however briefly, just because they lived in the same city. I liked how we could all potentially walk in and out of each other's stories, simply because we share the same spaces, stroll the same streets. I really liked the structure of Brand's novel, the way the story was revealed through multiple points of view, and I also liked the poetic language she seeded throughout, despite the grittiness of some of the characters' background lives. My short story is an attempt to play with those connections I saw, using a similar structure that Brand used, and allowing for multiple perspectives. I tried to explore different ways love and beauty can be built or damaged, and the different ways stories can intersect or not. Like Brand, I think there is room for beauty, for poetry, for love, even in an everyday, urban setting. Perhaps those moments of beauty and love are highlighted when they are played out against a backdrop of a restless city. This story is set in Edmonton, but it is fictitious. I wrote this especially for the contest. This isn't a deep delving into what people will tolerate or not for love; it's more like a summer's sorbet story: a little refreshing, I hope, but ultimately transient.

Lexi's father, Will, is made of weeds. He has slowly taken over the house. Lexi and her mother, Helene, periodically try to cut back Will's rampant growth, claiming this corner of a table, or that edge of a chair, but eventually, inevitably, Will's weeds creep into their cleared spaces and he sets down resolute roots.

Lexi can't help but think that her mother is lately misplaced in her father's undergrowth. When she isn't lost in a book, Helene stands by the window in the kitchen, looking out over what she can see of the back garden, at the occasional flurry of small brown sparrows, or sometimes finches, or grackles, or blue jays, or dark-eyed juncos, at the birdfeeder. When Lexi asks her mother what she's looking at, Helene just shrugs, brushes invisible dust off her shoulder, and makes another cup of tea. "Cedar waxwings," she whispers in her paper-dry voice, indicating the current burst of birds clustered in the branches of the blue spruce above the birdfeeder. Lexi looks, but sees only wings.

It's starting to get difficult to look through the windows. Will has lined every sill with layers of different objects, creating art, but also obstacles, between Lexi and Helene and the view outside. It's problematic even reaching the catch in the window. Lexi has to carefully lean over all the arranged objects to reach the window's fastening, but she is afraid of her clumsiness, afraid she'll dislodge some essential, beloved thing and her father's relics will topple into the sink, or worse, onto the floor, where they will crack or smash or otherwise create a chasm of chaos which won't be filled with peace or apologies. Other objects in the house are potentially movable: the hallway weeds can be replanted and the dining room disarray can be rearranged depending on whim or mood, but Will's window weeds are less so. Will would know if she moved anything, if she changed the position of his window arrangements only a fraction, only a little, only enough to open the window, just a tiny, little bit. Lexi longs for fresh air, but Will says fresh air will ruin the art, will kill the weeds, and then he coughs in disapproval and turns away.

Recently, Lexi hasn't been able to see her mother much, moving through the house. She wades through the weeds, looking for her, calling her name. She imagines she is wearing a pith helmet, has a machete strapped to her back, and she searches for her mother, a lost jewel in her father's jungle. Helene eventually emerges from the undergrowth, holding her latest interrupted book. "What *is* it Lexi?" she asks, not bothering to camouflage the irritation she has at being disturbed for no useful reason. She was off on an *Indiana Jones* adventure. She was *this close* to figuring out whodunnit; she was climbing into the mine shaft to diffuse the bomb; she was just about to find the missing, world-saving artifact. Anything Lexi offers can't compare to that. There are no bombs to diffuse here, only weeds; weeds that never stop growing, never stop taking over. But she can deal with weeds: she's always been a ruthless gardener.

Helene remembers what it was like at the beginning. They used to go dancing. She loved dancing. She loved the cool night air on her hot, dance-enlivened skin, loved the lights of Jasper Avenue blurring under her tired eyes as they wended their way home over the High Level Bridge, or through the river valley in the small hours of the morning. When did the dancing stop?

"Do you want to go for a walk?"

Helene blinks and looks towards her daughter. She wishes Lexi would stop screwing her hair into a knot on the top of her head. It makes her eyes look small and her cheekbones sharp. It makes her ears stick out. It's a hairstyle that would suit a troll, not a young woman. And Lexi, already a doughy daughter, hunches, which makes her look even more lumpen. Helene feels her spine straighten as she judges Lexi. *See Lexi*, she thinks, *why don't you try it? like me, see? I know you could stand upright if you wanted to.* But Lexi stays concave, and Helene feels irritation flare in the pit of her stomach.

She catalogues the rest of her daughter's appearance. No make up on Lexi's face, a mistake. Or a defiance. Lexi is wearing her walking clothes. Her left knee protrudes from the rip in her faded jeans; her plain white tee-shirt has old sweat stains under each armpit; her socks are dust grey. Troll clothes. *When did my daughter become a troll?* Helene wonders.

"Mum?" Lexi shifts from one foot to the other, a habit Helene hates. "Did you want to go for a walk?"

When is the last time she was outside for more than a minute? Helene thinks but can't remember. *Anyway*. She still has to interview the latest suspect. She's pretty sure she can name the murderer now, but there's still thirty pages left, and you never know what will happen in the last thirty pages.

"No." She shakes her head as if she's shaking away a buzzing gnat, and walks back towards the living room, clutching her book high above the clutter. Lexi watches as her mother is slowly consumed by her father's endless weeds. Helene picks her way through the warren of her father's overgrowth, promenades down the hallway, turns left, and the weeds close noiselessly behind her. It's as if she was never there, and only Lexi's imagination conjured her.

*

"But, it's only a shower curtain."

Annamarie holds the shiny parcel at the seams but she hasn't ripped it open yet. She turns the package to show Des the picture. Des looks at it. The shower curtain is clear, with colourful, tropical fish on it. It's not the shower curtain that Des would have picked. Des prefers things to be more opaque than that.

"Yeah babe, but I'm tellin' you, it's death in a package anyway."

Annamarie thinks Des sees death everywhere: in the tram car that rolls on top of the High Level Bridge in the summer months, in the spin of a wheel of a bicycle descending into the river valley; even in peoples' shopping carts. Des, who has a smile like a secluded crescent moon cutting a quiet midnight sky, who has liquid chocolate eyes, and nervous, long fingers, and a long greyhound body that is always looking for trouble. He blazes that smile at her now, dazzles Annamarie with its brilliance, but Annamarie is still holding the shower curtain, unopened between them, a question on her face.

"We need a shower curtain Des."

But Des just shakes his head. He cuts the air with one long hand. “No. I know. Look, I’ll take care of it.” He manages to usurp the package from Annamarie’s grasp.

“What are you going to do?” Annamarie stands by the T.V. She thinks she can feel static even though the T.V. is turned off. She brushes absentmindedly at the back of her right calf.

Des puts the shower curtain on the kitchen counter and pats it. “Nuh-*thing*. I’m not going to do nothing. Don’t you worry.” He pats the package again: *good puppy, stay there. Daddy’ll be right back.*

Annamarie eyes the shower curtain and Des drums his fingers against the kitchen counter and smiles again, but this time the white moon doesn’t show in Des’ midnight sky.

*

Des works on the construction crew, restructuring downtown. The Ice District has taken shape quickly, filling the core with a new arena; crowds of orange and blue McDavids several nights a week; and new glass towers that stretch and stretch and *stretch* towards the sky but never lose themselves in it. This city is not like Vancouver, Des thinks as he gives the signal for the crane operator to hoist the latest bundle of rebar. In Vancouver, the city dissolves into the grey sky, into the grey water of the bay. The buildings are blue-grey glass, the sea is blue-grey rime, the mountains are blue, the sky is grey, always sobbing, always wishing for sunlight. The city looks like part of the grey sea washed onto shore and crystalized. Des wonders when the sea will take the city back.

He thinks he left Vancouver just get away from all that grey. But he’s not truly satisfied here either: here there is too much sun. Edmonton skies are bluer than Annamarie’s very blue eyes, and sunshine decants golden rays down his back nearly every day of the summer.

That blue though.

Des takes a moment to look straight up and lose himself in all that azure.

When he first came to Edmonton, there was no construction job yet, so he just walked around, walked everywhere, trying to get the feel for the city. Wanted to see what her bones were made of, see what moved her, what she was like on a bad day. He wanted to roll up the sidewalks and see what secrets lay underneath.

He liked the summer festivals. A passerby, with no time to take in the bright blue day, said, when he asked what there was to do in Edmonton, “go see a play,” and Des said “Where?”

The passerby pointed him across the river and said, “Whyte Avenue,” so Des found himself walking the long bridge over the river towards the thespian-infested Fringe.

Annamarie was in a show where she sang, not very tunefully, and danced, not very gracefully, with a cast of five other women and men on a makeshift stage in a beautiful old school. Des smiled politely and clapped in all the right places, but then Annamarie turned to look directly at him and Des was arrested by *blue*. Couldn’t look away, couldn’t get enough. He had been starved for colour for such a long time.

He knew then that he had to get to know the owner of all that blue.

After the show, he trailed the giggling cast to the Wee Book Inn, and hovered on the edges of their conversations as they tittered their way through the stacks of comics and books. There were only a few other people in the shop: a young woman with her hair twisted into a harsh knot on the top of her head, hunching even as she looked up at the stacks of mysteries, as if she knew she didn't belong here, and a woman in an elegant red suit, a spill of corkscrew-curly hair ravaging from her shoulders to the small of her back. Des appreciated the hair, but he was on a quest for blue.

Eventually, she bumped into him. Des made sure she did. "Hi," she said, flashing her blue-sky eyes cheekily up at him. "I saw you at the show. Did you like it?" Des smiled his crescent-moon smile, and Annamarie suddenly realized how much she needed midnight. What had she been doing, messing around with daylight when midnight was here, *right in front of her*, and calling her name?

They walked back to Annamarie's apartment on the other side of the river. Annamarie stopped in the middle of the High Level Bridge and looked down at the water. The last apricot shreds of the sunset were dropping behind the river valley, turning the water molten. The banks were inky blurs jagged with evergreens.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Annamarie flung out a showman's arm to indicate the river.

"Yes," Des said, looking at her face. What did he care for such a stream? He was from a city that was mostly marine, seal-back grey, and he knew he didn't need to define his life by the rhythms of saltwater anymore. He had found something deeper than her little river. He touched her face, and turned her summer blue eyes towards him.

*

After his shift, Des likes to slink up to Purdy's in the mall and buy an ice cream. He always buys the same thing. Vanilla ice cream bar, dipped in dark chocolate. With sprinkles. The girl behind the counter has her nut-brown hair coiled into a knot at the nape of her neck, but little kinks have escaped to curl against her forehead. Des thinks her hair looks like a little Medusa, a Medusa-in-training. He waits patiently in line but she has seen him, is already preparing to dip the ice cream bar.

"With sprinkles?" She throws him a knowing look from under her thick eyelashes.

"Course." Des agrees, watching her roll the bar in candy colours. The sprinkles are the best part. He shifts the industrial particle mask to his other arm so he can fish for his wallet. It isn't his particle mask, but Stephen said he can borrow it if he brings it back by the end of the week. She hands him the ice cream bar and he tosses her a lunulate grin and walks away.

He leans against the corrugated concrete of the parkade, under the red neon "PARK" sign with its arrow pointing the way, feeling the late afternoon sun sink into his bones, feeling the grit and gravel under his boots, the cold ice cream, bursting with sweetness, melting in his mouth. He watches the bruised-gold sunset start to trap itself against the scaffolding of the buildings they

are working on, then fritter away against the mirrored shadows of downtown. He walks home, the particle mask dangling from one long, nervous hand.

*

Lexi props herself up against the inside of the door. She swipes cool hands over her hot, red face, kicks her shoes off in the porch. She has been out for hours but she thinks the weeds have gotten thicker in the house since she's been away. Perhaps they are multiplying by themselves now.

She hears a crash from the hallway and leaps up the stairs. Helene is pruning. She is shoveling great swaths of Will's weeds into an oversize black garbage bag. She sweeps her arm along a shelf, rearranging the art, so carefully placed, crashing objects into the bag one after the other: bang, bang, bang. Two more bags are already bulging behind her. She freezes when she hears footsteps but when she sees it's only Lexi, she pushes an empty garbage bag in her daughter's direction with an urgent fluttering of her fingers. "Quick, your father's gone out."

She means: *he's gone shopping.*

Lexi understands. She races towards a table with the bag agape, scooping objects into its plastic maw.

"No, not that one," her mother says when Lexi picks up a large faux tin clock that doesn't work anymore, aiming to throw it into the open pit of the bag to join the other discards. "He only just bought that one," she explains, lugging three swollen bags through the kitchen and towards the back door.

"Do we have time to do the basement?" Lexi asks, her voice a crescendoing shriek. Helene pauses. Once, she'd had a basement. She thinks of the stairs leading down to the basement, thinks of the possibilities for getting lost in the tangled, Aztec, underworld the basement has become. She shakes her head. "No, forget about the basement. It's gone."

Lexi is already backing up her car. They cram one, two, three overstuffed bags into the trunk. Two bags remain. Helene throws them into the backseat as Lexi scrambles onto the driver's seat and starts the engine.

"Go, go, go, fly!" her mother pleads, slamming the door, but Lexi is already speeding down the driveway.

"Dark-eyed junco," Helene mutters, looking at the house, and then she heads back in, already thinking of how she'll rearrange the residual weeds, the remaining art, to hide the gaps.

*

Des, particle mask in place, looses the shower curtain. He is on the balcony with the door to their apartment firmly shut. He unfolds the plastic, revealing schools of fish caught mid-swim, and drapes the curtain over the balcony rail. The plastic fish sway in the currents of the river valley zephyrs. Des knows Annamarie doesn't know everything. She knows how to smile when she feels like dying, knows how to dance on feet that feel like knives and not let anyone see, knows how to live off frozen perogies, Jasmine rice and black coffee for half a year, but she just doesn't

understand about chemicals. Des, all he knows is chemicals. He knows how to mix cement, what flux to use in welding or soldering, what the composition of insulation is. With no thought about chemicals, Annamarie would have just opened this shower curtain, hung it on the bathroom rail, and walked away. Every time they had a shower, they would have filled the bathroom, and then the apartment, with phthalates. Des knows this. He has resisted having a shower curtain for months because of what he knows. But he can't tell Annamarie why. And now Annamarie says she is tired of baths. Des thinks that this way at least the shower curtain has a chance to off-gas most of its chemicals before they use it.

He tries the balcony door. It's locked. The latch is loose and has fallen back in place. Des tries the door again, thumps on the glass. Annamarie is just coming home. He can see her, her face turned towards the open door as she backs in to their apartment, her hands full of groceries. He thumps the glass again and Annamarie whirls. She sees Des in the particle mask on the balcony, and screams. Des whips off the mask and puts his long nervous fingers against the glass. "No, it's me!" he calls. "Let me in?"

Annamarie looks at him for a long minute then walks to the balcony door. "What are you *doing?*" she calls through the glass.

"Nothing, I—" Des moves to try and block her view of the shower curtain rippling against the railing, but she has already seen it. She unlatches the balcony door and steps outside to join him.

"Des. The shower curtain?" She's left the door wide open. Des shuts it with haste.

"It's alright babe. It's just a temporary thing to, you know, air out the chemicals in it before we use it." He nods as he talks, flashing her a slice of the moon when she doesn't say anything.

"Hey, you shouldn't be out here. Not without a mask, you know?" he waves the particle mask like a white handkerchief.

"The chemicals...?" Annamarie pushes past Des and reaches towards the plastic curtain. Before she can touch it, a gust lifts it clear off the railing and billows it towards the river. Annamarie watches the tropical fish spin in circles, seeking direction, and then the curtain plummets downwards, gets lost behind the trees.

Des coughs, looks at his feet.

"That shower curtain wasn't made of PVC. I know how you feel about chemicals." Annamarie says it quietly, without any heat. She is looking towards the river, which threads just out of sight.

Des looks at her, then rubs the back of his neck. "Shit." He tries the balcony door, but the loose latch has slipped again, and the door won't budge.

Annamarie turns when she hears Des rattling the door. Des looks at her, liquid chocolate eyes not quite meeting hers, and Annamarie walks over to him.

"Des," she says, and traces her fingers over the hidden lunular feature of his that she loves so well.

Lexi doesn't know where to go. She doesn't know what to do. She can never keep a cool head when they excavate her father's weeds. She can't go to an Army & Navy or a Goodwill store. Her father would see his treasures in the shops and re-buy them. She has no money to go to the eco station. And would they even take what she's offering? She turns a corner aimlessly, her thoughts whirling. Why doesn't she ever know what the right thing to *do* is?

She ultimately finds herself driving towards the river valley, the car's headlights cutting icily through the growing dark. Although the summer light lingers forever in Edmonton, streetlights are already beginning to wink on. Some kind of clear sheet suddenly drops heavily onto Lexi's windshield, and Lexi screeches, slams on the breaks. Car horns cacophonize around her. She gawks for a minute at a pink-and-orange fish goggling back at her, then gets out of the car and peels the plastic sheet off. It's a shower curtain, she can see, still with that new-shower-curtain smell. Lexi rolls it loosely and tucks it in the back with the bags of "clippings" and keeps driving.

She eventually parks the car in a quiet side street near the river and kills the engine. She sits in the quiescence of the early evening, thinking. She considers the back seat and sees fish. She opens the car door and she hears the river, sonorous and ceaseless.

*

I am solar powered. Moira perches on the plush blue cushion of the LRT, her heavy handbag tucked on her lap. She balances a Tim Horton's coffee, a small book with a tooled cover, and a cellphone in her hands, but she has no signal in the tunnels. Her long, black, corkscrew hair falls into her eyes every time she bends to look at the screen. Her crimson suit feels too thin against the LRT's intimidating air conditioning. The LRT wails, a ghost trying to scrape its way out of the concrete passageway it frenzies through, and lurches to one side. *They always sound like they're driving with the emergency break on*, she thinks, and bites back another sigh. One day, when she has more energy, she'll write a letter to the mayor, let him know she doesn't appreciate the screeching, squealing, squalling, *lurching* daily LRT commute.

I am solar powered and lunar soluble. She thought she would try poetry. Her boss told her she has no art in her soul, and maybe she should try to read poetry for inspiration, so about a year ago, she picked up a thin volume of poems with an interesting cover, from a second-hand book shop, and she's been struggling through it ever since. She thought it would be easy, like reading a short story. She'd peeked at the poems inside before she bought the book, and they'd seemed small. Easy enough. But understanding poetry requires more brain power than Moira is willing to give at the end of a day. The train suddenly whips out of the tunnel and Moira can't appreciate the poem any more.

That view though.

They say there's selkies in the river. Maybe one day she'll find the time to look for them. She gazes at the last dregs of the burning evening sky dropping behind the sentinel evergreens. There is still a lot of ambient light on the shorelines, but that light is faded and bleached compared to the river, which looks like fire. She thinks she can see someone in a white tee-shirt on the trail,

opening bags of trash and dumping them into the water. Moira makes a mental note to write the mayor a letter about that too. Disgusting, the things people did.

The LRT screams into the tunnel on the other side of the river, cutting off Moira's view. Moira flips the poetry book to a new page and tries again. She's had enough, for today, of gilded evening river valleys, and of people dissolving into moonlight.