

Senior Division, Short Fiction

Emma Cole, St. John's

**Wildfire (an excerpt)**

Long after sunset, the sky above the mountains is this deep, burning red, roiling off in the distance. I'm on my hands and knees, cheek nearly pressed against the gravelly asphalt, looking for something hanging off the underside of my Jeep to account for the noise it won't stop making.

My phone is nearly dead, the power bank having gone uncharged for too long, and so I'm using the little bit of life left to shine a flashlight up to the underbelly of the car, as if I know what I'm looking for. The pebbles on the road dig deep into the flesh of my palm, grating away at my knees through my thin sweatpants.

The car is still running so I can hear the sound – that odd, high-pitched whining, or maybe more like a rumbling – that kept cutting in and out as I evacuated the park.

This Jeep is less like a vehicle and more like a co-worker; she doesn't like being roused suddenly in the middle of the night any more than I do. If I'm complaining, why wouldn't she?

A sharp coldness stings the back of my neck.

I scream – of course – and nearly twist my wrists and ankles as I spin around to face whatever is assaulting me, alone on a road in the dead of night.

Landing ungracefully on my ass, I come face to face with the would-be attacker; a dog.

Tongue lolling out of its mouth, the shaggy, white mutt stares straight at me, intense and unbreaking. Large, brown eyes illuminated by the yellow glow of the interior car light.

It's smiling in that way that big dogs do, happiness too big for their own faces. Even though it's showing me its teeth – huge fangs, really – the expression is nothing but joy – and expectation.

The dog barks at me, and I startle.