

## MENAGERIE

BY COURTNEY LEBLANC

This is the year I acquire anxiety, that donkey kicking at my chest, my brick heart thumping in response, leave me bruised and achy and still unable to sleep. There's a gerbil in my brain, running marathons on that squeaky wheel, each lap whispering a new worry for me to chew on: *who will die next? When will I find a new job? When will I be happy?* As if happiness is possible during a pandemic. As if the weight of living weren't crushing. Bees bumble around me, ready to drink my tears, ready to pollinate the world with anxiety. Think of the beautiful flowers that would bloom – spiky and dangerous but their bright colors would call to the tender flesh of your fingertips, blind to the thorns that desire the iron taste of blood. There's the ostrich, its dumb head buried in the sand, trying to hide from the latest headline. The gazelle that resides in my nervous system, alert to dangers real and imagined – is that a bug bite or cancer? Cough or COVID? WebMD says I'm likely dying. The cheetahs that hide in my feet, carry me miles each morning but still I can't outrun this panic that smolders inside of me. And what happens the day I smell smoke, the nervous fires stoked for so long they suddenly rage out of control. The animals inside me run, trample the tender flowers that sprouted around my battered heart, stampede for the exit but find it locked.