

# SOLILOQUIES ANTHOLOGY



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We would like to acknowledge that Concordia University is located on unceded Indigenous lands. The Kanien'kehà:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we gather.

Tiohtià:ke/Montréal is historically known as a gathering place for many First Nations. Today it is home to a diverse population of Indigenous and other people. We respect the continued connections with the past, present, and future in our ongoing relationships with Indigenous and other people within the Montréal community.

Editorial Team	5
Foreword	6
Contributors	75

## CONTENTS

9	Sunday, <i>Amalia Mairet</i>
10	Parc Hector-Charland, <i>Gabriel Lamothe</i>
11	Child's Play, <i>Ashley Fish-Robertson</i>
12	When Life Gives, <i>Patrick Emond-Sioufi</i>
23	Notre Dame de Chântier, <i>Johanna Donovan</i>
24	Butch, <i>Crowley Klara Jade</i>
25	the sunflower harvest, <i>Hannah Vogan</i>
27	Sway, <i>diane yeung</i>
31	Frère Jacques, <i>Jessica Ward</i>
32	Estrie, <i>Ilona Martonfi</i>
33	Grass, <i>Louise Carson</i>
34	forever home with the big window, <i>Hannah Vogan</i>
35	Dig, <i>Nicolas Viger-Collins</i>
46	Vacuuming, <i>Bronwyn Garden-Smith</i>
48	Trans Girl Taco Bell, <i>Rebecca Lynch</i>
49	Acts of Preservation, <i>Bryn Robinson</i>
50	Erroll's Oranges, <i>Jonah Brender</i>

- 56      Clingstone, *Amalia Mairet*
- 57      The River, *Delaney MacIntosh*
- 59      Buck Moon, *Amalia Mairet*
- 62      If Pink is for Girls, *Santiago Eastman Herrera*
- 65      Eternal Sunshine, *Jayde Lazier*
- 67      Bookstore, *Louise van Oel*
- 70      Yeats Never Cried Over Handpoke Artists, *Kat Mulligan*

## EDITORIAL TEAM

### *Editors-In-Chief* ❖

Morgan Gordon

Isabelle de León

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Christina Paraskevas

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Saskia Wodarczak

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Olivia Murphy-Major

Erin Staley

Toby Walma

### *Web Content Manager* ❖

Santiago Eastman Herrera

### *Web Content Creators* ❖

Jayde Lazier

Kat Mulligan

Louise van Oel

## FOREWORD

The earth turns, seasons change, and time continues to move forward. As the 2023-2024 academic year comes to a close, we reflect on all we have learned, all we have seen, and all we have gained. As we reflect, it is clear that we have gained so much.

In April, we were fortunate enough to witness the total solar eclipse, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. As cheers erupted across the city at the moment of totality, we breathed a sigh of relief. The community we so deeply longed for after the pandemic is beginning to be restored. This collective witnessing is what humanity depends on—to resonate with each other on a molecular level. As the most viewed astronomical event in history, we can only hope that this renews our global awe at the overwhelming beauty of the world.

Much like our global collective witnessing of the solar event, we at *Soliloquies* have had the privilege of witnessing so many incredible works by various writers. Our experience as Editors-in-Chief of *Soliloquies Anthology* has been incredibly rewarding. We have had the pleasure of getting to curate not one, but two anthologies with our wonderful, hardworking team. As we are now both graduating and moving on from Concordia University, it is imperative that the mark we leave behind is one we are proud of.

It is of the utmost importance that we emphasize our immense gratitude towards our masthead. The publishing of this edition—as in all editions—was a group effort, in all senses of the term. Our editors worked tirelessly to select and edit the pieces you see here. We feel so lucky to have sat in their presence throughout the year. Each of them has grown and evolved, both as editors and as people. We would like to think that our work here has contributed to that development, even in the smallest way.

We would also like to thank all our talented contributors, who so kindly submitted their pieces to our publication. We are so proud to give their pieces a home. This includes our website content creators, the four lovely individuals who have contributed their works to the *Soliloquies Anthology* website every month. We feel so lucky to have encountered their musings. Our anthology truly would not be complete without their writing.

Finally, we would like to thank our administrative team: our graphic designer, who created the anthology's cover, our social media and website manager, who kept our media outlets up and running, and our managing editor, who ensures the continued performance and success of *Soliloquies*. These past two editions would not be possible without them.

*Soliloquies* 28.2 embodies the feeling of the current and upcoming seasons: spring and summer. It is vibrant, full of colour, and jam-packed with life. Within the pages of this edition, you will find poems that tantalize, renew, and enlighten, as you journey from a park, to a river, to a Taco Bell drive-through. The prose illuminates and encompasses the ever-so-emotional human experience, taking you from a lemonade stand, to a greengrocer, to the hull of a ship.

This being our final release as this publication's co-Editors-In-Chief, we are so very thrilled with how *Soliloquies* 28.2 has turned out. We hope that you, our readers, enjoy it as much as we do. We will always look back fondly on our time at the forefront of *Soliloquies Anthology*, and are grateful that this will be our legacy. We hope that you resonate with this edition and its tales of love and loss, wonder and disdain, the heavenly and the tormenting. May you close this journal having experienced something beautiful.

Morgan Gordon and Isabelle de León  
*Co-Editors-In-Chief*





# SUNDAY

Amalia Mairé

I awake wine-blooded, head pounding.  
Spit settled in mouth corners like sediment,  
ash and grease beneath each eye,  
a half-burned votive.

Sunday,  
you make toast with margarine  
and feed it to me. Call it communion.  
I light incense, and the house reeks.

You don't mention it.  
This is the forgiveness  
we were taught as children.  
Hands are not for prayer  
this morning, they are for  
stroking your browbone,  
shrouding your light-fearing eyes.

I have never washed your feet  
with my tears, but we swam the river  
together, your head subsumed,  
surrendered in faith.

When they said,  
do everything in love,  
They were talking about the coffee  
you spilled on my white sheets.  
They meant the sheets  
and I would forgive you.

They meant that every look  
is love if you look carefully.

Absolution is everywhere

# PARC HECTOR-CHARLAND

Gabriel Lamothe

Is the kind of park that no one visits, the kind of park that can survive nonetheless, the kind of park that needs no reassurance, that can make a crucial public blunder like breaking a homemade mug at a friend's place and forget all about it (and how sorry I am, Maxwell!).

Parc Hector-Charland knows no reprisals, doesn't engage in complaining about the weather, never dwells on bad meals they've cooked, cannot forget a squirrel's nest in the barren trees and despises nothing enough to make it known.

Parc Hector-Charland is like a papaya if papayas ever tasted as good as they look, is like the jazz lick that scratches your ears for a day or so, is like the brand new companion you find after walking alone on the sidewalk for an hour in the 30-something fahrenheit cold, with no one to hold your hand.



## CHILD'S PLAY

Ashley Fish-Robertson

Spring flourishes into summer  
as wholehearted, flushed children  
rule over lush galaxies, reciting  
incantations from languages  
of their own making

they are laughing and frolicking, they are  
birthing valleys and meadows and castles all  
from the mind's playground

they are kings and queens of worlds we will never inhabit  
and they are free as wilderness,  
still pristine from bitterness

and with the pink of their new lungs, with  
fragile cellophane skin, they greet the days head on  
as they forge new lands and weave magic

for their mothers and fathers,  
who are trapped in dim static screens  
and endless routine.

# WHEN LIFE GIVES

Patrick Emond-Sioufi

Martha set the plate in front of Jason, and the porcelain thunked loudly against the table. He said, “What’s this,” so she gave him back some of his sour energy and said “Food.”

“I can see that. I thought you said eggs and bacon.”

“I tried something different. The bacon’s inside the eggs.” She took a seat next to him, leaning her forearms against the scuffed edge of their round kitchenette table, entwining her hands to pray.

“Tried something different,” he said, “...Okay.” Jason forked the food around until it looked like a differently shaped lump. By the time Martha had finished her prayer and started eating, he’d rearranged the eggs a few times. What he was thinking (and wanted to say) was ‘where’s the toast,’ but he stayed silent, forking away.

“You gonna eat your breakfast or just play with it?”

He sucked his teeth. “I’m just curious why you tried something different. Not like you.”

She massaged her temples before speaking. “You’re right, I never try anything different. Now would you just eat?”

Their mornings usually looked something like this: Martha trying to make special a typically insignificant time of day, and Mr. Jason Blunder so classically blundering through the whole ordeal. One might say thirty-six years of marriage was no small achievement. I think Blunder lacked the kind of macro-perspective optimism needed to understand that, because he didn’t think of it as an achievement at all.

He breathed in through his nose, and you could hear he was stuffed up. You could see he was tired, too, bags under eyes, but more than that, the syrupy skin of a badly hydrated face, and the slouching neck of a man whose head was too heavy.

“I’ll do you one even better and go eat with the TV,” he said, standing almost instantly. This was no insignificant gesture. He was mocking her.

But she was happy to see him leave the room, mostly because of his insufferable eating. He was a misophonic’s nightmare. Sometimes, when the TV wasn’t loud enough, she could hear him from around the corner, and well, she just didn’t quite like him as much on the days she had to sit through the sound of his chewing. All the better they kept a good distance.

So, he got up not long after finishing his food and announced his departure.

“Client wants me to repair a generator inside some repossessed storage unit.”

And as he walked out the door, she said, “Blunder away then.”

It used to be that that quip rolled off her tongue all tongue-in-cheek—she first started using it to toy with his guilty conscience when he was going anywhere away from her for too long—but now, it was painfully literal.

\*\*\*

Jason Blunder hadn’t been the sort of person who let something as silly as his own name get to him, but as the years had gone by—and they did, let me tell you—and his mounting dread: an indistinct feeling that his life was an unending stream of constant fumbling and faltering—had cemented itself in his mind, he began more and more to believe that there must be a kind of superstitious force working itself through his name.

So, when he found himself once again obstructed, as he did right then with the *House-Standard* thorium generator, he jumped straight away to the most extreme kind of catastrophizing-type thinking. The he-was-too old-for-this-shit type thinking. Because no way a young guy straight out of school who’d just finished sniffing the

pages of a brand-new *House-Standard* manual would be struggling like he was, and the might-as-well-give-up-being-a-repair-technician-altogether-type thinking.

Blunder blunder blunder blunder. What kind of legacy can live in a name like that?

No legacy worth shit.

“Goddamn *House-Standard* crap,” he muttered. It was probably *House-Standard* cameras in the building. He couldn’t be too careful.

He was working in the four-foot-wide hallway of one of those cheap repurposed apartment complexes. The machine was about two feet wide, which made for little workroom. He’d dragged it out into the hall to get it under the fluorescent lights, and while stretching his arms in between two cranks of the ratchet he heard a loud click. He thought at first it was his elbow popping, but the sound was coming from inside the machine, which was unusual, because thorium generators only had one sonically capable device, and it was an alarm bell which couldn’t click. Nothing *clicked* in a thorium generator. Then again, nothing really ever clicked in Blunder either. He was oblivious as all hell.

And well, the goddamn generator had only one side panel with flathead screws in it, and no one used flathead screws anymore except in junky home appliances imported from Southeast Asia (and definitely beneath Jason’s pay grade to repair), meaning he had no flathead screwdriver in his toolbox, and was stuck trying to use the claw of his hammer to twist the little screws. He’d had no issue with the two at the top of the panel, given that he’d had a full range of motion to rotate the hammer, but he battled furiously with the two at the bottom because they sat almost flush with the floor. He worked through multiple quarter-circle rotations and unscrewed at a snail’s pace, knowing full-well if he had just remembered to bring his hydraulic lift, he could’ve had this three-hundred-pound hunk of metal raised in the air for him to work on back-pain free.

That's just how it goes. One thing after another in an endless, grotesque torment. And yet, a part of him has resisted, has tried to see each mistake as being part of some larger whole, as if each time he blundered, a leg someplace sprouted, and eventually he would come to find that these thousands of legs belonged to a catatonic millipede who needed just that one more leg to be free from its miserable stasis, at which time it would act as the vehicle to propel him forward towards a great moment, a thing of great importance, of such great importance in fact that there could be no doubt of it, that he could not somehow pass it by.

And well, I'm not really one for the thrill of suspense, so I might as well tell you that today is the day. Today, while he practically breaks his back trying to fix this thorium generator, Jason gets his due. Blunder no more.

He was just about getting the panel off of the thing when an awkward motion sent the hammer flying, clanking on the ground gratingly. Then, even more annoying, a text message from the client that read, "Take as much time as you need Jason. Help's greatly appreciated!"

It was categorically pseudo-supportive. This reminder that his work was taking longer than expected caused a kind of cerebral inanition in Jason; it was distracting to the point that it immobilized him, and he stared at his phone for a good minute just trying to reckon with that particular patronization that masked itself as politeness. It infuriated him.

*Whack!* He banged the top of the generator with his fist. That oughta do it, he thought. Teaches those good-for-nothing inventors for coming up with something so clever yet so unbelievably unclever, what with regards to it being repairable and all. As he stood, he gave the machine a final look of disapproval, figuring it was about time to give up on it. But as he stood, it stood with him, and continued to rise until it stood seven feet tall—a blocky head, sort of like a toaster fallen on its side, sprouted from the top of the machine. In sum: a bulb-eyed, boxy-chested automaton with two fiberglass, tubular arms, and an omni-

wheel for legs. Painted like a spaceship, like a kid would paint a spaceship.

I believe I said Blunder was oblivious as all hell. Clueless is perhaps more astute, observationally speaking. Blunder certainly noticed things going on, he just didn't quite make sense of them right away. He's a bit slow-motion, brain-wise. Like for instance, he wondered why the hell some broke hillbilly would have this locked away in a storage unit anyhow, not because he recognized the automaton as being the *House-Standard* Perpetual Motion Droid MK III, but because it stood much taller than the ceiling of the unit, and if it had by some fluke stood up like that while inside, it could've caused serious damage to the structure, costing the very same hillbilly some serious cash—cash, mind you, that he doesn't think the hillbilly has, even though he was looking at an expensive robot which purportedly belonged to that, again, very same hillbilly.

Then *bam!* it hit him real fast and he realized just what kind of crazy situation he was in, and so he pushed against the chest of the machine to hide it from the hallway cameras, and he popped his head out from the storage unit while his hand held back the machine, feeling certainly covert agent right then, but also freaking out because he swore he heard a dog now—a vicious one too, if it was seething so intensely like that. And the more he focused, the louder it got. Around the corner for sure. Courage, stupidity, who knows, but he stuck his head out one last time to spot the dog.

Nothing.

He kicked his hammer to spook it. Still there, and even louder.

I'll spare you the details of this next thirty minutes of Mexican stand-off with the dog, because it was his own breathing he was hearing, and he was beat-red embarrassed afterwards, which is no way to portray a person of course. I mean, he'd even turned to the Droid and paid close attention to its zipper eyebulbs in case it looked at him like he was an idiot. He hadn't been quite sure. Ordering it around seemed his natural progression.



“Can you return to your transportation mode,” he said. “No way I’m walking out of here with you like that.”

“...”

“Voice command is shot. Great.”

He was going to have to call Martha. First, he had to text the client: “Generator is going to take a hell of a lot of work to repair. I’ve been wanting one for my tool shed. How about I buy it off you?” Does that text read calm and collected? It took Blunder ten minutes to whip it up.

But things were looking good. The client said he’d have to do some research about its worth, but that Blunder was free to take it home and work on it there in the meantime.

Phone in hand now: “Martha, get over to the storage unit quick...Yes, you can take my truck...You’re gonna need my dolly...No, the industrial one...Yes, it’s heavy as hell...What do you mean? Since when?...Well tell your doctor that your back is just fine...But you’re the one with the good spine...Fine, just hurry up please.”

Martha wasn’t anything if she wasn’t reliable. Made it to the building as fast as she could and even dodged bad traffic by taking a back route most people forgot about. Jason on the other hand was not so good. He rushed her over before figuring out the problem of the plain-as-day Droid MK III, so she was sat in his truck an extra hour while he figured out how to get it into transportation mode—

1. because he was paranoid about *House-Standard* monitoring, and so refused to do any online research.

2. because he’d doubted himself when he saw a switch he thought would put the Droid into transportation mode, and instead inspected every nook and cranny meticulously, until finally gambling on what was, of course, the correct switch, almost the first thing he’d come across when he’d started

looking over the Droid (and now the most unintuitive part on the whole machine, if you asked him).

Anyway, you can imagine Martha wasn't too happy when he got into the truck. The silence of the ride home amplified the road sounds. The hum of asphalt, cars zipping by, grumbling engine, quiet chatter of the radio—a kind of white noise orchestra that had them both oddly calm by the end of it.

“So what is the damn thing?” Martha said as they got home.

“You won't believe it. I mean, you're really not gonna believe me when I tell you.”

It was on the verge of aggravating, but he was so bright in the face when he said it, youthful even, that she couldn't help but share in the excitement.

“Whatcha find, a money printer in there?”

She followed him to the back of the truck to watch him take the thing down. Sure didn't look like a money printer. He waved her close.

“Come here. Get real close. Make it look like I'm going for a kiss on the cheek.” She stuck her cheek out at him and said, “You know you can actually just kiss me.”

“It's a Droid MK III.” His breath warmed her ear, but like moistened it too, which put a sour look on her face, and so when he pulled back expecting to see surprise, he was instead seeing scrunched eyes and a clenched jaw. I can't say how many times she's ruined a moment for him like this. He takes people's expressions badly, because he's developed in his mind a loose logic about facial expressions being the innermost personality characterizing itself in the outside world, and that no one really has any control over their own face, especially those people who think they're expertly deceptive with their expressions, because of course that deception *is* their personality, and those fake faces they put on to trick people, are in fact their one true real face

multiplying itself into varying experience. Like I said, a kind of *loose* logic.

And so, he's also developed in his mind this idea about Martha being generally repulsed by him, seeing as she's always making faces like that when he does almost anything—*anything* being the breathy close talking, snorting, loud chewing, throat clearing, deep sighs, and the like.

She had good reason, is all I'm saying.

He said, "What? What is it? Did you hear what I just said?"

"Yes, of course, it's just that I...I can't really believe it!" She turned to the machine, and her hand was an inverted L over her mouth. She started tapping the tip of her nose with the index that rested there. She then used the L like a finger gun to point at the machine. "That thing?"

"The client thought it was a thorium generator, the idiot." Jason grabbed the handle of the dolly and started pulling it towards their backyard where he had his work shed. "Come on, I've got to show you this."

She followed closely behind, looking around for spying neighbours. It was exhilarating feeling herself bonded with Jason like this again; up to no good together and not caring one bit what anyone else thought about it.

Well, maybe caring a little bit what other people thought about it. She could've sworn she saw Rudy peeking for a second there out the window. What she wouldn't give to have a nice window like that, curved along the wall of the house's tower. You needed to *have* a tower first.

"If you're serious about what that is," she said, "we could have that turret built onto the house with a pretty cupola. I mean, you'd never have to work again!"

“Sweetheart, I’d never have to do anything again. I could live like a goddamn king.”

They slipped into the shed unnoticed and he placed the automaton down onto the open space in the middle of the room. He wasted no time pressing the button, and joyed in watching Martha totally gobsmacked by the machine’s coming to life. It was short lived, because he knew he had to spoil the moment with bad news.

“The voice command is shot. I’ve got no idea how to fix it.”

“There’s no way to make it work with, like, a computer or something?” Not even a flicker of disappointment across her face. In fact, he could swear she looked even more intrigued.

He rubbed the back of his head. “I’m not gonna lie. This is a bit out of my league.”

She reached her hand out to rub the thick metal plate that was the machine’s chest. It was nice and warm. And for a moment, her eyes were galaxies. “Jason,” she said, “I don’t care how long it takes us, we’re getting this thing working.”

And they did. Those coming months were laborious and trying. They fought often, out of pure stress over the whole affair; except, they also laughed at silly mistakes, sat together solving problems, danced to celebrate overcoming a hurdle, and so on. Properly bonded for a change.

\*\*\*

Martha never enjoyed eating with Jason, mostly because he had it in his mind that he had to chew all his food until it was a practically-liquid mush, or otherwise his gut health would start to go because it was working overtime trying to break down large chunks of food, and so she’d often sat beside him feeling miserable about his slow-chewing and weird sideways chomping, until finally she’d get up and go eat somewhere else, at which point he’d say something like “where’re you going,” or “okay, I’ll see you later I guess.” For years she’d been

teetering. That's just how relationships go. Sometimes people are just one chew away from divorce. But that had come to a complete halt since they'd fixed the Droid's voice command.

It was unbelievably stupid, all said and done. A basic wiring issue that was invisible to the naked eye. They'd only figured it out because they thought to replace the full set of wires one day. Still, it's been a whole two months since they'd gotten it operational and haven't decided what to do with it. The limitless possibilities were overwhelming. For Jason, mostly. She'd made the mistake of letting him get to choose how to use the machine, y'know, because it was only fair, since he found it in the first place.

\*\*\*

Martha descended the stairs and found Blunder eating in almost complete silence, his eyes watery. He was fixated on a photograph from his childhood, him and his mother and younger brother together in front of a lemonade stand. He was tearing up, looking fondly at the photo. It was an expression so foreign to Martha, that when he glanced over at her watching him, and kept that same special look on his face—and not because of her, she knew that, however painful it was—she felt all queer inside, like they were just seeing each other naked for the first time.

"I want to run a lemonade stand," he said, grinning away those years of obduracy all at once. Really looking at her with love, and rubbing his forearm across his face to wipe away the crying. "I know it sounds crazy. We've got a goldmine in that shed, but just hear me out. It's only a lemonade stand for now, but maybe we get to a point where we open a whole juice shop or something, and we can output more product than anyone, I mean the machine can produce enough glasses of lemonade for the whole city in a day, and..."

"Hey, hey, it's okay, come here," she said, grabbing hold of his head now that he was full-on sobbing. "A lemonade stand is a good start."

She thought it over while stroking his hair. “Besides, we can’t do anything so crazy and get all that attention on us.”

\*\*\*

It wasn’t too long before they had a little operation going: Blunder had teens buying lemons in bulk around town and dropping them off at his place, each at different times of day, on different days of the week, and the automaton in the shed making lemonade all day, and his stand out front, where him and Martha would sit selling darn good lemonade to passersby.

It helped that they were located at the end of a long highway which had exactly one pit stop that most people drove right past, thinking there’d be another along the way, only there was no next one, and then they were 75 miles into a drive and parched. So why *not* stop at the quaint lemonade stand? Usually, it was the best lemonade they’d had in years, too, like their meemaws used to make.

And well, Jason and Martha never really tried to make it big with the lemonade business.

But they were awfully happy together.



# NOTRE DAME DE CHANTIER

Johanna Donovan

A land where boys and girls never grow up

and out of playing with trucks and cranes. Where  
bright oranges and yellows colour the nest  
of cones and hard hats littering the landscape—  
a giant version of the mat on my living room floor.

The swivelling shovels do have a kind of Grâce  
as the caterpillar tracks rumble along and CAT  
buckets, loaders, compactors, and dozers play,  
shaking walls, dust, and peace from my day.

I navigate the streets as I do my home, carefully  
tip-toeing through the maze—dangerously tipping  
my “all-terrain” stroller around detours and twisting  
or breaking a wheel, an ankle for my trouble.

The trail of cars herded into a single lane line up  
to pass through the tunnel, slowing to peer  
into gaping holes at dancing excavators  
scooping up the rainbow-coloured sand

and dumping it over the dinosaur trying to escape  
the pockmarked terrain of a city choked  
by monstrous toys colluding to create roads that leak  
lime green. I wish I had a crane-sized broom to sweep

away the myriad of striped cones and bales of battered  
crooked signs boding ill. An auger to pierce  
through the industry obstructing my path,  
camouflaged as arrangements of crossed boots

propped on lunch pails, resting from making a racket.

## BUTCH

Crowley Klara Jade

When I wake up and I am a boy  
I will cook for you,  
Wear my rings and laugh  
A hearty laugh. I'll  
Kiss your palms and  
Sniff sweetness from your neck.  
I'll smoke my cigarettes like I  
Know you're watching  
And I'll wrap my fingers around your  
Belt loops.



# the sunflower harvest

*after sylvia plath*

Hannah Vogan

she does not speak when it's late  
and you just got home from the store  
hand on a carton of relief, steeped in a rich stench of  
diesel, sour plum and skunk.  
    you don't speak as you rush to bathe  
    in the blood of the father, tomato juice and citrus essential oils.

she does not shout when it's warm out  
and you sow your wrath into potting holes  
of where your sunflower seeds were supposed to grow  
    you stuff leaflets of your grey hair into wormholes  
    hoping the pregnant soil delivers an apple tree  
    free of worms and snakes,  
    with a nibble of commitment to new year's resolutions  
    and fruits to slender your fuck-ups and feed your not-yet-  
    married wife.

she does not mind watching you  
forfeit your crops to your faults.  
in fact, she'll help you by macking on the striped seeds:  
splitting the shell clean in three with her tongue,  
mashing the seed to swallow  
and spitting the shell shards in her pocket.

she does not plead when you're far, by choice.  
your feet, buckled and fastened securely in suede envelopes  
to run close enough to be reached on an eclipse  
but far enough  
to neglect yourself and find solace in the never-quiet crickets  
    you told yourself  
    she led you through the door  
    patted you on the back, lit a fire under your ass  
    and warned you to run until you find lightless, infertile land,  
    dry with sunflowers.

with your inflated hope you tell yourself  
the sunflowers will grow once you rake the clouds from the  
sky.

and still, she does not mind being handed the rake,  
pulling tangled tufts of clouds from its metal teeth;  
nicking her hands she has called yours.

she cannot speak when you fill in for sisyphus to make the harvest  
worth it: she cannot speak without bumping her lips together  
undyingly, she cannot speak without blowing her pent-up burdened  
breath on your borrowed boulder.

## SWAY

diane yeung

Wake an hour before the alarm. Turn over and switch it off so it doesn't wake anyone later. Paw around the room for the suit and those new glasses. Wash your face longer and more thoroughly than ever before. The water shatters lingering sleep, but boyhood clings. Shave the stick-straight stubble that only grows on your chin and the upper corners of your lips. Decide against the hair gel.

Grab the overnight bag and the new briefcase. Pull out a cigarette with your teeth as you close the front door behind you. Check again for the address of the York County Detention Center and your ID in the chest pocket.

Instead of taking two buses to the shuttle, walk 45 minutes. Pass through the still-sleeping suburbs of West Philly, ignore the dogs barking behind chain fences, and squint at the yolk of the June sun rising as you cross the highway overpass. The shuttle leaves at 6 A.M., which is in half an hour, but it hasn't arrived yet. In case it doesn't arrive, the address is in your pocket. Other Chinese people arrive at the stop. They're all Fujianese. One of them calls you *Little Brother* in your shared ancient dialect and it sticks.

Your sister will not be showing up. She got you the gig, *Little Brother*, she'd said in her stern eldest daughter voice, *are you ready for this?* It wasn't really a question. *They're just now realizing that most of the victims don't speak Cantonese or Mandarin, only Fujianese. I've been trying to tell them for the last week... Anyway, they're finally asking for more FJ interpreters. I gotta go with the prosecutor's office in New York for the case against the captain, but you'll be working the passengers, okay?* Before you could answer, she was on to the logistics. Neither of you mentioned any other details about the case, because everybody in the community knew about it. The headlines were flooded over the last week with news of a cargo ship that ran aground on the coast of Rockaway Beach in Queens. It was named the Golden Venture and carried 286 Chinese migrants. The media called it one of the largest cases of mass smuggling ever captured in American history. Nobody cared to specify the distinction between human trafficking and human

smuggling. The eyes of American citizens were tinted with either pity or prosecution, but both were on the basis that an illegal was still illegal.

The shuttle arrives, and the driver is white. So are most of the guards, social workers, public defenders, legal aids, immigration lawyers, and administrative coordinators from the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service. Whenever one of them speaks to you, they ask whether you speak English. Nod and politely reply *Yes* every time. Do not recognize the irony in that you were hired as an interpreter. Feel the clunkiness of the briefcase now.

On the tour, notice the detention center's uncanny resemblance to the prisons, and that most of the detainees are Black and Brown people from various backgrounds: Latino, Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern. Refrain from asking about or even alluding to notions of time. *How long has it been?* and *How much longer?* are questions to be avoided at all costs. Do not detect any casual racism when social workers talk about them or the Fujianese. *Under no circumstances are you allowed to speak about the case to anybody, and don't watch the news*, they warn. You nod each time, thinking it can't be that hard.

The day starts quickly, and all the training happens in real time. There is no need to process any of the content from interviews one after another. Your job is simply to translate them into English and let them vanish from memory. They usually begin with accounts of the voyage: the harrowing two month journey from Mombasa, Kenya, the too-tight bottom deck where the crew condemned the migrants, the one bowl of rice per day. Some accounts are to be translated as politely as possible to volunteers, no matter how brutal and violent they are described in your mother tongue. Memorize each volunteers' introduction and don't think too much about how many of them are actually paralegals and not lawyers.

Join the rest of the Fujianese interpreters clustered outside at the end of the day. Light your cigarette away from the others, because for some reason it feels rude to be the youngest of the team and smoking. Try to pay attention to the hushed conversation on the shuttle to the hotel. Ignore the sudden resemblance of the shuttle with detention vans. Check into the room, which is designated a non-

smoking room but draped in the smell of stale cigarettes. Don't complain to the front desk. Head straight into the shower. Scrub your dark yellow skin fiercely. Dismiss the thought that you might share distant, ancient relatives with some of them. Put on the striped button down shirt instead of the t-shirt. Head down to the lobby and follow the team to dinner.

Try again to pay attention to casual dinner conversation. Reply in Fujianese when someone asks which village your parents are from. Address everyone as your older brother or sister, because that's who they are. Be polite. Ask people questions about themselves and not about the detainees. Resist the urge to scream and shake them about the stories you've heard. Do not dare ask which Fujianese words were used to describe rape or symptoms of certain illnesses. Be polite. Linger around for an appropriate amount of time for after-dinner smokes in the hotel lobby. Head upstairs when you start feeling the urge to pace around.

Change into sweats and lay in bed. Stare hard at the ceiling until you start seeing the face of the first woman you interviewed. Feel your fingers turn cold when you hear her ask, *Where is my son? He was on the boat with me. He's only ten.* As soon as the smell starts to creep into the room, bury your face under the covers. The hotel sheets' bleach smell tries and eventually fails to conceal the ones described by passengers: piss, feces, so much puke, layers of sweat and semen, a rotting corpse.

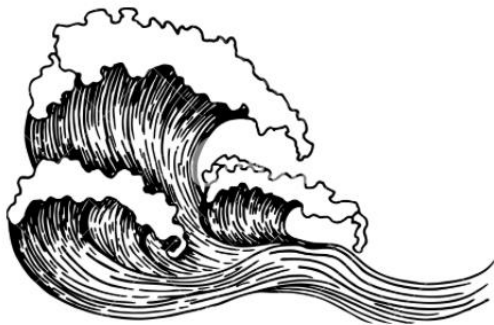
Force yourself to sleep and do not wonder how tomorrow might go. Do not turn on the TV. Do not think about the motel in New Mexico where you stayed with your mother and other Fujianese families for a month when you arrived in this country at six years old, and the sense of adventure you felt at the time. Do not think about the ceremony where you and your father and siblings were sworn in as American citizens when you were a teen. Force yourself to sleep.

Wake day after day in the hotel. The interviews get worse but you get better. Feel a sense of importance and justice in the work. Hear the public defenders say that it's important to stay objective. Forget when they had stopped referring to the passengers as "victims" and

begun calling them “defendants.” Accept, without questioning, that the Golden Venture passengers are now either pre-trial offenders or those seeking political asylum. Always refer to the passengers as “they” as opposed to “us” (you and the white people you translate for).

At dinner one night, someone talks about a new video released of the inside of the ship. Shovel rice and fish into your mouth as you listen. Show no interest in the subject. Tune out until someone says it was on CNN. Keep your head down when someone shushes the person loudly. You are not the one being admonished, but it feels that way. The after-dinner smoke tastes like shit. Call it an early night.

The ceiling looks different tonight, and the bed is floating. It suddenly begins to sway, as if buoying itself at sea. The woman is asking about her son again, and the rancid smell is back. Get up to avoid nausea. Turn on the TV. Look for the channel guide and find CNN. Pace around the room until the commercials are over. The video plays immediately, before there’s a chance to sit down. At first, the footage looks like it could be from any ship’s bunker. When the camera pans onto the stained floors and walls, you cry out. Collapse onto the floor. Break down like your father did after the swearing-in ceremony. Don’t hold it back. Vomit all over yourself, onto the carpet, into the sea.



## FRÈRE JACQUES

Jessica Ward

The church bells still ring  
in a blackout. We crouch  
quilted under rotting wood,  
amassing splinters hailing  
fury from the I-beams, turning  
against each other by noon.

To kill time I lock our parents  
in the cloister, pulling purgatory over  
your eyes when I smell burning. Remember  
when we condemned our attic to fire,  
our precious pyre gnawing  
the ancestral fall.

Or I watch you contort into  
a paper matchbox. Laugh while  
I spout ribbons to spite our rulers,  
easing the embark towards  
unspoken recovery—towards  
the uneven notches of time.

And you wonder why our father carves  
himself in camouflage, why he saves  
his patronage for sleep. But I see  
him on your brow as on mine,  
feel him etched in the grain  
of our headboards.

I hear our mother echoed  
by the bells that rapture as we splatter  
our candles. Clutching the rail  
on the way down for supper,  
our paper doll hands magnetized  
together, inheriting  
floorboards to fall through.

## ESTRIE

Ilona Martonfi

how still  
where the morning sky  
the swamp sparrow's song  
I harvest green zucchini  
bake it into rye bread

stone house that stands  
in the region of Estrie  
I rewild the land  
blackberries and raspberries  
rock piles for lizards, slugs

a glacial lake  
Missinaibi rock paintings  
the summer wind was  
fetus circular and flat  
the womb being the Earth

in a blueberry patch  
of this old farm in the  
unweeded meadow  
sometimes walking barefoot  
I could feel the grass





# GRASS

Louise Carson

*All flesh is grass*, Isaiah 40:6

A tender wounding: lawns cut, fields cut.  
The mower's loop, lyric hum.

You visit Scotland one July,  
to learn the smell of summer, next year, home,  
is dry, warm, sour, as grass and stone relax,  
breathe air and rain.

And you visit the shore, where a sea takes  
the land's scent, replaces them with fresh nothing.  
You stop for potato soup, soda bread;  
in them, smell the island.

Even Edinburgh smells of summer; gassy,  
as though animals, bought and brought, funnelled  
through to the next or the next-after-that stop,  
still drop their dung onto the *muir*,  
hide-sweat absorbed by rock.

Cut, grass or flesh lies for a time, dries and shrinks—  
honey-smoke, beef jerk—the way your body might, left alone.  
You test this thought over more than one summer.

## forever home with the big window

Hannah Vogan

the sullen-eyed kin-soured worry-stricken tinker man  
bought his forever home with a big window in the country  
for his poodle to dirty, for his frail fiancé to love.  
with the deed he signed; he tethered his will to the house, and ate  
sliced brown and bruised apples  
from blue and white rooster-painted porcelain  
till his breath got hot.  
the house, too, slowly nibbled at the man's tender spots  
feeding on its guest: a reversed parasite.

this home is forever; to be lived in, die in, and pass on.

this man's got that one-thousand yard stare.  
with his legs crossed on a flimsy inch-thick mattress,  
he braids his fingers into the coils of his poodle's uncertain hair.  
he looks out his big window  
eyes fixed on one-thousand single-file lines of buckwheat  
running into the dipping sun.  
gooey pools of amber light spreads  
downward across the sky, spilling  
onto the field and dribbling  
into his new home with the big window.

the sun is setting, and the black satin pillowcase is stuffed in the sky  
and he will watch for the stillness of the glowing molar motionless in  
the dark.  
through his big window  
he watches dust dance through the Cimmerian farm roads.

the sun rose with the intention to set; to release  
to invigorate the snug and to conceal the observed.  
his hungry eyes feed on the dimming, craveable scenery; the view is to  
die for.  
and he sits in the grumbling belly of his forever home; it's hungry too.

# DIG

Nicolas Viger-Collins

George Rushton had the sudden urge to dig a hole in his yard. He awoke as if it were any other day. He made himself his morning coffee, ate his plain oatmeal, and took his lukewarm shower before getting dressed. Once finished, he made his way to his backyard; a decently sized lawn but the upkeep wasn't perfect as the grass had started to brown. In the centre was a patio table with the chairs neatly tucked in. The yard was encased with a typical wood fence commonly seen in many suburban houses. There was a barbecue where dust and spiders had made their home, and a red painted woodshed which had been chipped and peeling. It was barely taller than George (who was 6' 2) and about as wide as your standard station wagon. He marched straight to his shed, opened it, and went to retrieve his shovel. It had been quite some time since he last used it, and he fumbled around and knocked down a rake and garden hose that had been tangled up in the shovel. He placed his two hands firmly around its neck, a wooden handle that was rough around the fingers. The spade at the end had begun to rust. George marched back outside.

Upon exiting the shed, he took a moment to examine his surroundings. He sauntered around the lawn, poking parts of the ground with the end of his shovel, and occasionally looking up to the sun. He eventually moved the patio table; first grabbing each chair out individually before dragging the table, and struggling a bit with it, ripping up parts of the grass as he moved. Once finished, he planted the shovel in the table's location. By the time he started digging, it was around 11:30 in the morning. His wife had long left for work and his two children were at school.

By this point in the day, George was usually busy with his first of many daily prayers. Most days he did them in the comfort of his bedroom, but on particularly beautiful days, where being surrounded by nature and life was moving, he would pray in his yard. These prayers weren't a staple throughout his life, he was raised by some hippie parents that lived in a commune with dozens of other 'free loving folk' who rejected any form of traditional religion, instead opting to participate in new age and 'cult like' practices. It was only in the past

few months while George was stuck at home battling it out against his sanity, that he decided to watch a documentary about the Bible. One random boredom fuelled idea after another, led George to *actually* read it. In the back of his mind, he thought of what might happen if he missed his prayer time. Though he didn't stop to think why he felt the need to dig, nor what his family would think when they stumbled home and found their yard ripped up with dirt and grass piled on their furniture. At the centre of it all was George, shovel in hand and deep inside a hole, digging. George wasn't quick or slow with his digging. He was tall and there wasn't much in the way of muscles on his body. Over the years he developed a slight belly; partly due to ageing and partially from one too many beers these past few months. On most days, he would be out of breath from the idea of digging. The most fascinating element was the simple fact that George lacked the knowledge to successfully dig. However, on this very day, at this very moment, he was able to dig with extreme ease. He simply dug.

At around 1:00 in the afternoon, George's neighbour Santiago - an older Cuban man in his golden years who didn't much care for the Rushton's nor for George's outside prayers - stepped outside for his afternoon suntan. He lay in his lawn chair, slathered in sunscreen and a stiff drink by his side. He started to relax. That is until dirt landed upon him; as if it were being dispersed after a mortar striking the beaches of Normandy. Santiago flipped his sunglasses up and made his way to the fence. He peered over to see George standing about waist high in the ground, shovelling away.

He brought a cigarette to his mouth and lit it, "What's with the digging?"

There was no response from George. He kept digging, he was focused with his head down and his eyes firmly locked, watching his movements.

"George! What the hell are you doing?"

After a long moment of silence... "Digging."

“I can see that. Why?” Santiago asked, picking out pieces of dirt from his drink, and flinging them onto his neighbour’s lawn.

“I just am.” George said, keeping the same pace and without breaking his concentration to the ground.

“Well, you’re disturbing my quality time with the sun, so can you not?” Santiago muttered. “First the stupid prayers and now this... jackass.”

“No, I must dig,” he said, his eyes locked firmly on the ground in front of him and face barely visible to his neighbour.

Santiago took a long drag, stared into his drink and contemplated drinking it even though dirt had just been in it. Ultimately decided that he should. “You need help?”

“No. Only I must dig.”

“No, amigo, not help with digging,” chuckling to himself as it was obvious that a man of his age wouldn’t be of much use to George. “I mean do *you* need help?”

George remained silent.

“It’s okay if you’re hurting. I lost my brother in the Great War, and I had no one. Shit’s tough out there.” Santiago waited for a response from George but decided he’d be left waiting a long time. “I know we haven’t always gotten along, but if you want you can talk to me.”

George said nothing and kept digging, yet Santiago saw that George turned his gaze ever so slightly towards him, and thought he could see the tiniest of smiles form on George’s face.

Deciding that his conversation was likely to go nowhere further with his neighbour, Santiago ended his tanning session early. He watched George from his kitchen window for a bit with his wife. They spoke to each other briefly, a few tears rolled down his wife’s face as

they lowered their heads and recited a short prayer in George's direction.

It was now 3:30 in the afternoon. Normally, George would already have picked up his children from school. Today, however, he had other preoccupations. In emergencies like this, the school always calls the home. Today, he did not hear the phone. It had been ringing constantly from around 3:10 to 3:20, but George was too preoccupied to even perceive the phone, let alone perceive the fact that he had a responsibility to oblige. The school had called his wife while she was at work. Immediately upon hearing the situation, she dropped everything and rushed over to the school to pick up her kids, and then sped her way home; praying that her husband was alive. By the time she came home and stumbled her way to the yard, fighting back tears, she saw his head poking out of the hole in their yard.

“George?” she sort of half mumbled; her face motionless, and her eyes locked onto the hole.

He was unaware of her arrival and responded with the sound of the shovel making contact with the ground before being tossed out the hole repeatedly.

“George! What in God’s name are you doing?” She didn’t wait for a response before moving to cast a shadow over him, cooling him from the beating sun. She was sharply dressed, wearing a black pencil skirt with a matching blazer.

“What have you done to our yard?” Her voice shook as she spoke. She was panicked at what she saw but quickly switched to a new flying rage at what she perceived as her husband’s idiocy.

“Digging.”

“I’m not blind! I can see that, but *why* are you digging?”

“I just am.”

She paused, contemplating a response to her husband, but found nothing would suit this situation. In response, she removed her jacket revealing a white tank top underneath. She surveyed the height for a moment, before crouching down and slowly making her way in the hole; dirtying her shirt in the process. There was barely enough space for the two of them and yet still room for George to continue digging. She had her arms crossed and was staring at her husband hoping he would take his eyes off his shovelling for only a moment, but it was futile.

“George. Look at me.”

Silence.

She reached out for the shovel, but hesitated to actually touch it. She wasn't sure what type of reaction he would have; would he go into a violent rage or would his psyche crumble and have him break down, reducing him to tears? He was too focused to see his wife. She slowly moved her hands, her anxiety causing them to shake, and grabbed the shovel from her husband's hands.

“Stop. Fucking. Digging.”

He didn't immediately react. Instead, he sort of stood there for a moment as if his body shut down and was in the process of updating.

“What are you doing?” he asked, a bit too calmly. It was almost as if he wasn't aware that he was speaking to his wife, unaware of any emotion she was going through.

“George, I beg of you, what is with the hole?”

“It's what needs to be done, Carol.”

“What the hell does that even mean, George?”

“I was told to dig.”

“By who?”

"God told me, Carol" George said, his tone of voice remained calm, and he seemed to be well composed, "God told me to dig."

Carol loosened her grip around the shovel and planted it into the ground, leaning on the handle.

"I was spoken to in my dream," announced George. "I was in the clouds, above the world, higher than the planes, and the sun was shining. I was in a state of pure bliss and peace. Before long, a hazy rift in the sky was revealed. It was beyond anything I had imagined before, and I was terrified until the most soothing and warm voice tore through. It was God. He said He heard all those prayers that I'd been doing, and that He had a purpose for me. He told me that I must go out into the yard, and dig a hole."

Carol gazed at him, worried. "I think you've lost your Goddamn mind, George. You've been cooped up inside for too long."

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About nine months prior to George's sudden calling to dig, he had lost his job at the bank. He was inconsolable at the beginning and shut himself away from his family; he was stripped of his purpose, no longer feeling like the man his father had raised him to be. He was always told that his duty in life is to provide for his family, or he would never amount to anything. George spent his days lounging around the house; waking up whenever, drinking whenever, doing whatever motivated him whenever. His family was concerned for his well-being as less and less hopeful as the days progressed.

Then the daily prayers started. He prayed at least once per day. Although, depending on his mood, he would pray up to five times in a day. His kids didn't mind his prayers. They were too young to understand what he was doing. In fact, his children would often join their father in his rituals. Carol didn't immediately know how to react to his newfound devotion. She knew her husband was going through a tough time, and that perhaps he needed this as a coping mechanism. She believed it would pass, and that all things would return to normal.



Some days he would go into his yard and try to speak to God, praying out loud. He would even pray in his sleep out loud, waking Carol who, in her half slumber, would simply chalk it up to an active imagination. It was always a one-sided conversation, but it seemed to keep him sane. Thankfully, George eventually found purpose once more. He wasn't spending his days in his pyjamas laying on the couch and only moving to grab another drink or use the bathroom. Instead, he would get dressed and do chores. Even with his newfound motivation, he at times still felt as though his brain wasn't quite right.

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He pleaded with her to keep digging. She could only look at him with bemusement at how ridiculous he was sounding.

"Normal people don't dig holes in their yards," she said, staring at him. "Just please, please put down the shovel and come inside."

"I can't. I was told to dig, so I must dig."

Carol stood there and tried to think of something to say, something that was perhaps elegant or empathetic, but she could not think of anything of the sort.

"Fuck this," she retorted, "I'm going inside."

She then climbed her way out of the hole, knocking some extra dirt back in as she struggled to get out. She brushed the dirt off her shirt, picked up her blazer, and stood above her husband.

"Don't dig yourself a grave out here", she said, and made her way back into the house.

It was now close to 8:00 pm and the sun was gone. George still continued to dig. Carol refused to let the kids see their father, she thought that it might snap him back to reality, but she didn't want to risk scarring them. The kids had asked her what their daddy was doing outside.

“He’s lost something and he’s trying to see if he can find it,” she replied. Luckily for her, the kids were young enough that she could be vague or make something completely ridiculous up and they would take her word for it to their tiny little graves.

Carol ordered the kids some pizza and let them drink soda and watch TV out in the living room for as long as they wanted. She, like her husband, didn’t eat anything. She fixed herself a stiff drink, a double vodka martini. She pulled a chair from the dining room table and placed it in front of the house’s glass sliding door that led to the yard, and proceeded to watch her husband dig.

She wondered why he'd started in the first place - if something had snapped inside his head that made him spiral into this insanity. As time passed, Carol drank herself through her thoughts. She would often zone out and stare off into the wall in front of her, wondering about her husband, unsure if she'd be able to bring him back to her, and thinking that she might have failed him. As the evening progressed, she started contemplating other ideas. *Perhaps he was being truthful, perhaps God truly spoke to him and commanded him to dig. After all God likes to play jokes on people, just ask Abraham.* Eventually, Carol gave up watching George after one too many drinks and dozed off in her chair.

By the time she awoke it was 12:50am. In her half drunk and half-asleep state she could barely make out her husband, who was only visible due to the patio light being turned on by some passing creature triggering the light sensors. She got up and staggered her way to the door. Unsurprisingly, George was still digging away. She remarked that the hole was now double the size as last time.

“Honey, will you come inside now?” she asked, her voice hoarse and hushed.

“I haven’t finished yet.”

“Do you know when you’ll be done?”

“No. God will let me know when to stop.”

She wasn't sure what to say to George, to the man that she once knew as her husband. In that moment he had become now, a stranger. She couldn't muster the strength to fight with him. She knew that it would all be futile and would only lead to more confusion, for her. Before heading back inside, she turned slightly in her husband's direction and said, "I'm going to bed, see you in the morning... I love you." She did not wait for a response.

By this time in the night, it was pitch black. George was unable to see what he was digging; spade in the ground, foot coming down heel first and pushing the spade deeper, lifting the dirt, and chucking it over his shoulder. His hands had formed calluses, his forearms burned, and he could no longer feel his shoulders moving. His only indication that they still worked was that the dirt was being ripped from the ground. The hole was getting so deep that the dirt he was tossing out was starting to just miss the edge and would fall back inside, sometimes landing on George's head. Even with this, George simply dug. There were no real thoughts going around in his head. He focused on the task at hand, never questioning God or even himself. The gruelling hours of nonstop digging began to take its toll on George's body. He was soaked with sweat; his hands became unable to grip the shovel as effectively as before. His mouth was left dry, and he had thought to himself that soon he'd have no liquid left inside of him to perspire. His stomach sent him pangs to remind him that it had not eaten in sometime.

The pain of his labour was nauseating, and caused him to gag. He spat up a bit of bile, which seemed to snap him out of his trance-like state. He was suddenly acutely aware of the ache and tremble in his legs, the sharp pain that shot through his entire back, and his hands which cramped and blistered and caused him to drop his shovel. His legs gave out and he collapsed to the ground. His vision started to blur, and his brain felt as though it had been smacked repeatedly by some metal object - perhaps a shovel. George struggled to breathe properly; the embrace of asphyxiation loomed over him. His vision at this point had gone black. It seemed George had dug himself his own grave.

But Georges' journey wasn't at its end just yet. He should consider himself lucky as it seemed the divine power up above hadn't finished with him. In an act that one would describe as *Deus ex*

*machina*, God appeared to George. White filled George's mind and a voice spoke to him.

"My child! Don't die yet, there's still more for you."

"How much more should I dig?" was all George could seem to muster up.

"Dig for all that you've sinned, for all that the world has sinned. Once you've achieved this then you will find true peace, both on Earth and here in heaven with me."

"But I can't go any further, I've died."

"Nonsense. The human body is meant to endure suffering above all else. Your mind is still weak, but I shall help you this one time."

"What if my body fails me again, then what?"

"Then you will fail me, and you will fail humanity. Afterwards your soul shall be cast into hell for all damnation!"

"I won't! I'll keep digging until my task is complete, no matter how long it takes or the cost!"

"Good, my child. Now I shall bring you back to your human form. Do not disappoint me."

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George let out a large gasp and immediately felt the urge to puke again. He wasn't sure if he was crying or if he had sweat so much. His hands were shaking, and his mind was blank. He didn't want to acknowledge his death to himself, thinking it would distract him from the task he had been given. His body was still weak, and his movements were terribly slow. He was distracted by the racing of his mind. Speaking to God made him feel invincible and gave him the determination to keep pushing forward. He understood, now, that not

even death could stop him. He took a moment to recompose himself, it was once more time for George to do what he was meant to do.

In a cruel twist of irony, rain started to fall. It was unusual for this time of year. However, it wasn't just a drizzle of rain, it was a torrential downpour that overtook the area. George, taken aback by the sudden storm, desperately climbed his way out of the hole. Water came down hard over him and knocked him back down. With the force of the water, the massive dirt pile came down as well. The resulting mud swallowed George. He was trapped in his hole, water and mud entered his lungs and within moments of the storm's passing, George was dead.

The downpour passed and it seemed as if no rain had fallen at all. The divine force of the storm pushed all the dirt back into the hole, neatly covering it up. The grass also quickly crept its way back to match the rest of the lawn. From an outsider's perspective, the lawn looked untouched. It was as if nothing had ever happened - as if a massive hole hadn't been dug up by a desperate man who was at wits end.

The next morning, Carol awoke to the lawn looking immaculate. She called out for her husband, and asked her neighbours if they'd seen him, all to no avail. There was no other shovel in the shed for her to dig up her own hole. She desperately called the police, and they came over along with the fire department. They came each equipped with a shovel in hand. Carol pointed at the spot where her husband had dug up the previous day. Quickly, a few strong firefighters started digging. What took George over twelve hours, took them less than two. They dug and dug, until Carol pointed out to them where she remembered seeing George last. They didn't find George's body, all they found was his shovel.



# VACUUMING

Bronwyn Garden-Smith

i.

Presently I am both the vacuum  
And the arm that holds it.  
I am that long ribbed tube  
That sucks up rocks from the carpet,  
I suck and sit in what I've sucked  
While everyone forgets to clean me out  
And I don't even get upset about it.  
I love the rocks that stuff me slowly,  
As they scratch my teeth, threaten  
To overflow my from mouth,  
For even inside me they glitter.

ii.

When I come home from work,  
I realize I've estranged my own vacuum,  
Locked in its dark closet, choked by coats.  
I feel ashamed and wonder  
Which vacuum is more mine.  
Did my rocks end up in a bin,  
Never again to reflect light?  
Those bits of earth, so persistent,  
Stuck in the violent seal of the garbage bag,  
With its sickening new smell of plastic,  
That material for a delusional society.

iii.

But what do I know? I'm just  
A baby's arm, not even a whole baby,  
Sticking out of my mother's womb  
Shaking with fear at the ugliness of most things,  
Needing badly to be oiled, my skin so sensitive.  
Though I wish things were different,  
My arm is not innocent  
And I cannot pull it back inside.  
With my tiny fingers I point outward

At the ocean that knows the truth,  
The breaker of rocks into sand.

iv.

Hardly anything big has ever been true.  
There's verity in the diffuse, the horizontal,  
The debris under rugs seldom moved,  
The dirt in an infant's fingernail. I'd only be  
A little surprised to find the truth stuck  
In the deep groove of my shoe tread.  
Truth is the kind of thing that's everywhere  
In little doses, that's available especially  
To those who dream badly and work late  
And who clean carpets for a living.  
That's what I like about it.



# TRANS GIRL TACO BELL

*For Ela with one L*

Rebecca Lynch

Tall, dark-hair and fishnets;  
an island of beauty in this  
infinite concrete sea.  
I say *it's weird a bar has this much parking*.  
You introduce yourself as Ela with one 'l.'

When I tell you—you say,  
*you're in deep-state-boy-mode*  
and me, a glutton  
for your attention, agrees;  
swallowing your gaze whole.  
Our friend's friend  
shouts something at you  
I don't understand  
and you confide you hate  
when white people speak patois.

I hate when you call Canada *America Lite*—  
we can be awful in our own way.  
Still I hover behind you as you play Smash Bros  
to feel your realness  
in this endless everglade state.

In the Taco Bell drive-through,  
you talk about manga, the gay kind.  
You tell me it's like Sappho  
because you heard I'm a poet.

I haven't read much of either  
so I just nod, watch you  
bite into a Crunchwrap Supreme.  
My brain freezes as I try  
Baja Blast and you smile at me.  
It tastes like freedom, like femininity.  
It tastes like you,  
fucking our friend under the dash.



## ACTS OF PRESERVATION

Bryn Robinson

Drag a finger through dust  
on the mason jars jammed on the shelves;  
Packed, like pickles, to steep  
in the cold room, untouched, in the shade.  
You watched her, in the haze  
of a summer day that clung like a fog  
stuck to skin, as she tugged  
new fruit, fuzzy, from tender green braids.  
These recipes, passed down—  
the bread and the butter of us.  
She would stand by the pot,  
black speckled enamel, and stir  
hot acid—years of brine—  
spooned gently over cucumbers  
chopped into sterilized jars,  
for the next generation to stew,  
for decades on a shelf.  
Fresh-packed pickles last ages  
if you never open them.



# ERROLL'S ORANGES

Jonah Brender

Erroll's truck was full of fruit.

Driving back from the market, wooden crates rumbled in the trunk, directing oranges and blueberries into hectic choreography.

The philosophy of Erroll's fruit store was simple. Every morning, Erroll would look over the day's delivery and picture the potential geometries of his displays. In his mind, bags of cranberries, granny smith apples, and clusters of grapes swirled in and out of pyramids and prisms; trains of raspberries and pineapples formed rows, columns, and stacks of every height. This is what had set him apart, fresh fruit at affordable prices—curated by an artisan who accepted nothing but the ripest, most lustrous produce.

With calloused hands, Erroll lifted a box of Californian oranges and brought them to an empty table in the middle of the store. Each orange would be sold for \$0.50. With the oranges costing Erroll about 5 dollars per crate, he turned a humble, but reliable, profit. Raising each orange to the light, he evaluated the yellow refractions cast across the oily skin of the fruits, before arranging them in a construction marvellous in its stability and consistency. Every label, the store owner ensured, was facing inwards.

Erroll plucked an orange off the top and cut it in half. A fine perfume sprayed from the rind, which would have slightly irritated the lips of anybody less accustomed to the sensation than the store owner, but Erroll sampled his fruit every morning. Somehow, though, this orange did make Erroll's mouth quiver the slightest bit.

It was a busy day at the store. Eager hands darted around, grabbing baskets, and plucking blemish-free fruits and vegetables from their displays. The pyramid of oranges was deconstructed, level-by-level, such that all on display were gone by the end of the day. The last client walked out with two grapefruits and an English cucumber cradled in her arms. Waving goodbye to her, Erroll knew this was the beauty of his store: the people and the produce. The next day, though—as he had

the day before, and the day before that—the store owner would repeat this same routine, stacking fruits, taking inventory. He had increasingly begun to perform every task with the rigidity of an over-rehearsed actor.

Erroll frowned over this as he drove to the market the next morning. He was at a tipping point, he would later realize. On one side of the scale, beautiful food, clients, and a store which was all he knew—on the other, him, locked in the same daily action as if jailed by the grating of a shopping cart.

When Erroll arrived at the market, a maze was forming. The tidy rows, in which the vendors had arranged themselves, dissolved, as boxes of produce arrived from every arable corner of the world. Dodging left and right, Erroll wove his way through the ever-changing obstacle course to reach his primary supplier, who was near the back. He saw the man who ran the stall, Maurice, talking to another client. Neither one seemed very comfortable. Maurice's arms were crossed, and he was shifting his weight back and forth on his legs. When he saw Erroll approaching, he shooed the other man away and took off his cap.

"Erroll," Maurice began—he had gone pale as he started talking, and his hands were squeezing the brim of his hat nearly flat.

"Erroll, the oranges I sold you yesterday—I have found out, or been informed by the provider—were not properly tested. The right crate was swapped for different oranges. But the new oranges were not right. They had a parasite—the Clerenci worm."

Erroll himself was going pale now. "What is a Clerenci worm?"

"A very small worm: invisible, microscopic—not dangerous. But it eats the pith of the orange, putting out sugar, and a hormone." Erroll remained silent. "The hormone is not dangerous but can put the person who eats it in... a bad mood." Maurice had squeezed the hat to a quarter of its normal size as he spoke.

Erroll stared at Maurice but saw nothing. A bad mood? Erroll tried to imagine the Clerenci worm—cream-coloured, ridged, and curled in on itself. He pictured himself facing a worm larger than he was; they were in a field of oranges. Beneath his feet, the ground was giving out. Erroll sank deep into the earth. The worm got smaller and smaller as dirt closed in on all sides—but then, everything changed.

Erroll was no longer suffocating, but swimming in a sea of fruit. Sun shone, and his mind had grown clear. What had first seemed an impossible situation was now as simple as floating over gentle waves of grapes, apples, and blueberries.

Erroll looked at Maurice and laughed.

“So, the oranges you sold me were sweet, with very small, microscopic worms and might have caused my customers to feel irritated... That’s it? Doesn’t seem so bad!” Erroll said.

“Yes, yes, that’s right—a couple hours of frustration, almost normal,” Maurice said, looking relieved, and somewhat surprised, that the store owner had taken the news so well. Maurice put his hat, which was still quite crooked, back on his head.

A sudden jolt of lightness had spread through Erroll’s body. At first, the unexpected situation had paralyzed him, until he saw that this novelty could be the source of his liberation. Everything felt new on the drive back to the store. Besides, Erroll knew his customers would forgive him for this incident. He had earned their trust through his service and his prices. The consistency which he had built into the foundation of his business could weather, and perhaps even embrace, any anomaly.

That morning, the first customers arrived and while the news disturbed their ritual produce-gathering, they quickly calmed as Erroll explained the details of their dilemma. Many felt relieved to have an excuse as to why they had lashed out at their partners the evening before, or thrown out their children’s toys, which they had stepped on. One customer had sent her boss an email announcing her imminent resignation—but conceded to Erroll that it was something she had

wanted to do for some time. Even those whose temperaments suggested they may have had an orange or two for breakfast were eventually guided towards relaxation by the assurances of the store owner. All remarked on having noticed the unusual sweetness of the fruit.

When it came time for Erroll to close that evening, his eyes brimmed with an electricity they had been missing for some time. He put the extra inventory of oranges from the other day into his truck and took them home. A plan, which would require careful planning and research, was hatching in his mind. In the meantime, he needed to keep this excitement alive. He never again wanted for his tomorrows to mirror his yesterdays.

As his customers arrived the next morning, they found the store rearranged. Apples had been piled onto a table in the middle of the room, all the other fruit displays had been pushed to the walls.

“We’re running a special promotion today!” Erroll announced to the customers who had entered the store. “If you can hit the bull’s eye on that target,” he pointed to a poster he had fixed on the wall at the other end of the store, “with one of those apples, I will take 25% off your bill.”

Bernie, one of Erroll’s older clients, directed her walker straight towards the apple pile, but Amanda, one of Erroll’s more conservative clients, interjected.

“Families shop here, this place will be a mess—some kind of funhouse!”

“I say let the apple juice run!” Erroll laughed and handed Bernie an apple. “It’s about time we trade the normal for some excitement.”

Amanda begrudgingly did her shopping, paid, and walked out in a huff, while Bernie—who had an astonishing throwing arm—guffawed as the apples she pelted against the wall splattered into pieces. Erroll ended up giving her 50% off.

By the end of the day, the back wall of the store was covered in apple pulp. You could track the timing of each throw in the oxidation of what was once white flesh and was now various shades of brown with bright red and green skin poking through. Erroll swept the debris into compost bags.

He went to bed smelling like apple pie and slept soundly through the night.

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Weeks passed and Erroll continued to stage special events at his store: fruit sculpture building, guess-the-vegetable charades, and unusual fruit salad tastings. Some customers had stopped coming to the store, but their places were filled three times over by those who had heard about the unusual shenanigans. It was now typical for Erroll to open his doors to a line of people, all eager to see what the store owner had prepared for them.

Behind the scenes, Erroll had been dedicating himself, above all, to one project. Finally, it was ready to unveil.

He had been struck by the positive impressions the ill-temper-inducing worms had had on his customers and was determined to not let this circumstance go to waste. After he had closed the store that day, Erroll began researching the Clerenci worm at once. He found that the worm was remarkably heat-resistant. Once latching onto an orange, it could survive almost any condition as long as it had pith to feed on.

So, Erroll made marmalade.

Testing sugar and water ratios, different varieties of candied zests, caramelization versus simmering, the store owner determined a perfect recipe to highlight the exceptionally sweet fruit. His small apartment smelled so strongly and enduringly of citrus that his neighbours complained. Perhaps, the oranges' bad mood could be transmitted through vapours too.

Rays of early morning sun shone through the windows of Erroll's store and into a chest-high stack of golden jars. Cast in the brilliantly warm light, Erroll stood in front of this display, and saw orange behind closed eyelids.

As customers entered the store, they approached and examined the new product.

"So, you're going into the distribution business, eh?" a customer asked.

"I think the world could really use this product," Erroll responded. "I'll start small, but hopefully you'll start seeing this marmalade everywhere people might need it."

The customer picked up a jar, and read out the label, "Erroll's Bad Mood Marmalade: For When You Need a Little Anger for a Little Courage to Make a Change."

The customer looked at Erroll, raised his eyebrows, and gulped down a big spoonful of the orange preserve.



# CLINGSTONE

Amalia Mairet

Summer is stone fruit season, August  
beating down on each membrane until  
the plums slump and burst in sticky jumbles.  
Roadside stands piled, the pavement hot  
and oozing. Peaches, with their skin like  
fuzz, trichomes like unshaven thighs.  
The fallow's harvest, its wounds split open.

Once, I showed you how to slice  
nectarines, the way my mother taught me,  
peeling flesh from pit with slick fingers,  
the two of us laughing with mouths full,  
never eating for hunger. Nectarines  
by the lake, held up with thumb and index  
fingers away from the dusk. The ants climbing  
our legs on instinct, inky bodies  
ruled by scent and anticipation.  
The juice running over your knuckles,  
between the valley of your fingers,  
collecting at your elbow.

Later, you undress in swift motions,  
skin glowing silver-blue in the light  
of no-parking signs, laying under the black  
sedan skylight and the cool shadow of my gaze.

I watch the violet curve of your back  
and think of the peaches, ruptured  
skin thick with sugar and sensation.  
Whoever named clingstones knew that seeds  
must be cut from the core, that flesh does not  
forget itself easily. She must have known  
about summer, peeling things  
with your fingertips, about temptation.



# THE RIVER

Delaney MacIntosh

The year the river didn't freeze over,  
I went skating at the mall.

Channels tangled like twine  
tightened around my waist,  
pulling me through frosted plains—  
I could not see.

How much for the mannequin in the window?

I tug at its sleeve and  
paint your name beneath the nose—  
now, he can carry my skates.

The year the river didn't freeze over,  
I learned to hold my breath underwater.

I counted 60 Mississippis and  
bobbed up to tell you my time.  
Window shopping for air,  
gasping at my reflection—  
the winter sun kept me under.

The year the river didn't freeze over,  
I held you in disdain—  
carrying you limp towards the bank,  
watching the water levels rise until  
we could float.

I forgot how it felt to have snow  
pressed up against my shins;  
I had to take the long way home.

Silverware set on the table,  
exchanging glances with the door,  
wading for a knock

or a cry—

for glasses to chime—

for the current to take you—

for the year to turn over.

Your head, gently bobbing down the way.



# BUCK MOON

Amalia Mairé

July is cool, misleading,  
especially at night, by the ocean.  
The grass has gone dry.  
The moon hangs pale and yellow,  
a shy toothy smile above the water.

In the field, a pair of antlers sits abandoned.  
Kiss my hair, each of my fingers,  
your touch warm and waning.  
Pick the burrs from my sweater,  
pull it down over my stomach.

If this touch seems affectionate,  
add more light to the scene, look  
from another angle. It's not your fault,  
the dark makes things ambiguous.  
The water lays, cobalt and empty.

There are arbutus trees with thin red bark  
that pulls away from the branch  
in little scrolls. Peel the bark in shreds  
until the branch is exposed, just green flesh.  
I cannot bring myself to tell you to stop.

Take an action and hose it down, strip  
away its meaning. Reduce it  
to impulses. Not to seem desperate,  
but I want you to tell me something.  
I don't want to imagine it anymore.

I keep thinking of the grass, that cricket  
we caught. Cup it in your big hands.  
I dream we kept it. Reach for pins,  
corkboard. My hands go weak before  
I pierce the small, perfect wings.  
The moon hangs heavy. Precarious.  
I can never kill that cricket.



# WEB CONTENT ARTICLES

## IF PINK IS FOR GIRLS

Santiago Eastman Herrera

“The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys, and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl.”

- Article from the trade publication *Earnshaw's Infants' Department*, June 1918

I remember one day, I was invited to go to a Halloween party at my high school. Because of my religious upbringing, I was never allowed to celebrate the holiday, so I thought this was my chance to finally dress up and eat candy with my friends. It wasn't a particularly clever costume—I donned my pajamas, threw a bathrobe on, put an eye mask on my head, and called myself Sleepy the Dwarf—but I was excited, nonetheless. As I was about to step outside, my father, who throughout this whole ordeal hadn't cared one bit, suddenly stopped me and started to yell. “Where do you think you're going, dressed like that?” he demanded. The problem? The eye mask I found belonged to my sister, and it was bright pink and fuzzy.

The association with pink as a feminine color is actually pretty recent. The word for the shade, found in ancient texts like *The Odyssey* (“rosy-fingered dawn” anyone?), was coined around the late 17th century as a way to describe pale reds. The word “pink” was initially used to describe a certain type of pigment and is thought to come into English from the name of a flower, the *Dianthus plumarius* (*The Secret Lives of Colour*, p. 115-116). In the 17th and 18th centuries, British soldiers were outfitted in brilliant shades of red to signify their courage in war (the infamous Red Coats), which, over time, tied the color displays of masculinity. Since shades of pink and white lasted longer through numerous washes and were easier to bleach clean (and maybe subconsciously tied boys to manliness, who knows), baby boys were often dressed in pink.

In Medieval and Renaissance art, the color pink was often used in relation to baby Jesus. Many paintings depicted our savior in shades

of fleshy pink or giving a pink flower to his mother, the Virgin Mary. Symbolically, a pink flower stood for marriage, so him giving her one showed the unity between Jesus and Mary, one of the most important women in Catholic doctrine. Mary, meanwhile, was almost always decked out in shades of finest blue. But why?

In part, this comes as a result of a decree by Pope Gregory I around 600 AD, who ordered that all religious paintings should tell a story that was clearly comprehensible to all viewers, and that figures should be easily recognizable, especially that of Mary (Kessler, “Gregory the Great”). Up until the 19th century, the blue pigment for paint was created from crushed lapis lazuli (a mineral found only in Middle Eastern mines), meaning it was prohibitively expensive for painters in Western Europe to use. In order to access it, an artist had to ask their patron to buy it for them. (Patrons would often agree as they wanted to show off their wealth and their devotion to the church.) By reserving it only for the Virgin Queen, the Catholic church had inadvertently tied the color blue to themes of holiness, humility, and virtue. This unstated practice remained the norm until French chemists invented a synthetic blue that made the paint more accessible (which then tied it to ideas of royalty as heads of state all jumped at the chance to be the next to use it).

Without realizing it, my father had tapped into an ingrained notion of a standard that only started a few generations before his. Boys don’t wear pink, his actions told me, and men don’t leave the house looking effeminate. I was more annoyed than anything else at the time, but the memory of the event has stayed with me throughout all these years.

Pink was mostly reserved for boys until the 20th century, when a variety of factors caused a significant shift in popular consciousness. For one, during World War II, Nazi soldiers forced men convicted of homosexuality (a crime almost as bad as being Jewish) to wear a pink triangle on their sleeves to make sure they couldn’t hide in public (Waxman, “Pink Triangle Symbol”). In the US, Mamie Eisenhower wore a beautiful pink dress during her husband’s presidential inauguration, and Elsa Schiaparelli, an Italian fashion designer, created a violently bright shade of clothes she dubbed “Shocking Pink,”

popularized by none other than Marilyn Monroe herself (*The Secret Lives of Colour*, pg. 126-127)

Fashion followers and companies caught on to the trend, using the rosy color as a way to target female consumers in ways never done before. Suddenly, pink was the new “it” thing in North America, used by women to stand out from the crowd and embrace their femininity, and by men to symbolize seduction, passion, romance. Over time, these gender dividers became entrenched, ending in pink aisles full of Barbie toys for girls and blue-dyed cakes at gender reveal parties for boys.

It’s weird to think that something that seems so pervasive in our culture is a relatively recent phenomenon. The color pink underwent lots of backlash during the second wave of feminism, and efforts were made to broaden its audience (the most famous being the ribbon for Breast Cancer Awareness). In sports, several men’s soccer teams proudly display pink uniforms, and the London *Financial Times* newspaper uses a distinctive salmon color for its newsprint to distinguish it from the others on the newsstand. Nowadays, even if associations with color are heavily affected by personal experience, some psychologists argue that pink has a calming effect, or can symbolize peace and creativity (“The Color Psychology of Pink”).

I’m not expecting to change anyone’s mind about their favorite color here (and do keep in mind that these are generalizations for a very long span of time), but I know I at least was surprised to realize how arbitrary the ideas around pink were. I wasn’t allowed out of the house because 60 years ago, some woman decided to market her favorite color to other powerful women? My father didn’t let me go until I changed into something more appropriate: my mother’s eye mask, plain navy blue and not even remotely fuzzy. Only a century ago, baby boys were swaddled in pink dresses. If the color is good enough for Jesus, then, by God, it should be good enough for modern men too.



# ETERNAL SUNSHINE

Jayde Lazier

When many of us hear the concept of an eternal sunshine, it's envisioned as a positive phrase that inflicts prolonged happiness, but in reality, there's a crippling sense of irony behind the phrase. In order to fully immerse yourself in this concept, you need to selectively pick and choose what memories you allow yourself to remember, which dehumanizes you in a sense. When you choose to remove your emotions from a situation or suppress hurtful memories, you're depriving yourself of feeling. I know that it's easier said than done and heartbreak is a horrible thing to have to experience, much like grief and regret. But even though all of these emotions are challenging, they are key experiences to being human. Without pain and sadness, we would never be able to grow as human beings. It's from the pain that we are able to take an introspective look at ourselves and evaluate our choices in life.

The concept of an eternal sunshine is something that I find myself struggling to indulge in quite often. On a personal level, when a relationship in my life ends, it would ideally be a lot easier to just push down my feelings and act like it didn't really affect me. In doing so, I can slowly start to force myself to forget or alter the memory so much that I begin to only remember the good parts. This makes it so that I don't have to endure the experience of pain, anger, or sadness, but in reality, I'm depriving myself of feeling human emotions so that I can live in a state of eternal bliss. I did this for so many years and it's not been until recently that I've come to the realization that I would rather have a heart that can love so deeply that when that love ends, I feel such an overwhelming sense of pain. Rather than being numb and not allowing myself to experience risky emotions, I would rather learn from my pain and grow as a human being. Pain helps us to try and understand more things about ourselves and it aids us in becoming someone who isn't afraid to face their emotions or too intimidated to deal with their issues.

This concept has been explored in pop culture many times, with the two most notable ones being the 2004 film *Eternal Sunshine of*

*the Spotless Mind* with Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet and Ariana Grande's new pop album, *Eternal Sunshine*. The film depicts a couple who choose to erase their memories of one another after they break up and slowly begin to forget that the other ever existed. Meanwhile, Grande's recent album, which explores a variety of feelings, encapsulates emotions around trying to move on from a love and struggling to feel all the feelings. Ariana also released a music video for one of her songs on the album called "we can't be friends (wait for your love)," which was an homage to the Jim Carrey movie. Grande is seen removing her memories after a hurtful breakup yet halfway through, she wakes up from the procedure and begs the nurse to please let her just keep this one last memory.

It truly is an extremely emotional music video that perfectly illustrates the intensity of human emotions and how, even though things can be viscerally painful, processing and accepting these emotions is key. We all have autonomy over our vulnerable emotions, and we can choose to let it define and break us, or we can decide that it is going to make us into the most beautiful versions of ourselves. If we do, the next time we experience a challenge like this, it won't hurt so bad—even if it does, we'll be better equipped to handle it.

So, feel your feelings. Take advantage of the fact that you have such deep and beautiful emotions that when you're sad, you cry, and when you're angry, you scream, and when you're hurting, you do all of the above because we won't be able to feel for forever. Your memories are yours and yours alone so don't eliminate the hard parts. As time goes on, you'll come to find that all of these painful memories and emotions that you've experienced over your lifetime will act as the stepping stones to your truest self. That's the kind of eternal sunshine I believe in. It's important to remember that the sun does not constantly stay up and it does not constantly disappear. Sometimes it sets and then it rises again. Sunshine is not eternal and neither is pain.

# BOOKSTORE

Louise van Oel

You walk into a bookstore. Not an uncommon occurrence, but you have a special feeling about today. Today, you are sure that you will find The One.

That appellation may be misleading. There is almost certainly no single book that will define you or your entire life. There is, however, a perfect book for any given moment. Often you don't have it, merely reading occasionally as you go through your days, but you know when you do. When you've picked up a book and suddenly it consumes your hours, makes your mind soar with its ideas, and makes your heart race with its artfulness.

Every bookstore you walk into has this book in stock. You just have to find it.

You walk over to Literary Fiction. This is the section with both the highest and the lowest chance of success. Books for all sorts and all minds live here, but the "category" is so broad that your efforts will be mostly hit and miss, with very little guidance beyond spine colours and titles.

You pick up a book that psychologically picks apart the phenomenon of bestiality in a modern family. You put it back. The next book seems promising until it mentions an incest plotline. You put it back. Bad luck with sex today. A deep dive into a depressed plumber's final days finally pushes you out of Literary Fiction. To dredge up your personal gem from this bottomless ocean is too much of a daunting task.

Science Fiction next. Perhaps the book that will most touch your soul at this moment is one of alien civilisations meeting across immeasurable distances, creatures forming bonds despite the differences they barely understand enough to describe. Perhaps what you need is a heroic tale of a small team surviving together out in inhospitable space.

The first book you pull out is about interplanetary war. So is the second. The third is about a pandemic that nearly wipes out human civilization on Earth. The fourth is about a cross-solar system pandemic that wipes out not one but fifteen species. You leave Sci-Fi with the icky feeling that something might infect you through the pages.

Fantasy, perhaps? A bit of historically-flavoured magic, fascinating worlds, and Arthurian courtly romance might be what you need right now. Escaping the everyday through spells and sorcery can make dreary reality seem just a little more bearable, after all.

You leave Fantasy after having read about approximately fifteen different man-creature hybrids having intercourse with beautiful women. Many of the men had wings of some kind. Some had claws, which seemed hazardous. One definitely had a tail.

Maybe Nonfiction will have what you need. You could ignite a new lifelong interest, learn more about a facet of history or science, maybe discover the life of an inspiring person you never knew existed. Sometimes, the most captivating stories are the ones people actually lived. Perhaps the biography of a great person—a ruler, an artist, a hero—will incite you to throw yourself headlong into making your mark on the world. From that book onwards, you'll live a more noteworthy—perhaps even bookworthy—life.

No luck. Tragically, nothing here sparks you either. You retrace your steps through the shelves, prepared to trudge back home without that spark in your backpack and your mind. A shame. You really need something to jolt you from your everyday, a new obsession to remind you that life never stops being exciting.

Your hand slides along the spines absentmindedly as you think about the dull grocery shopping you have to do on your way home, and the nowhere-near-finished essay for your least favourite class waiting for you on your laptop.

Suddenly, your fingers catch on a book that is just a little taller than the ones around it. You stop, curiosity piqued at last. Is this It?

Turning to face the shelf, you pull the sole copy out from between its neighbours. The cover is beautiful, but you wait to judge until...

You turn the book over to read the back. Your eyes absorb the words.

In your chest, something catches.

# YEATS NEVER CRIED OVER HANDPOKE ARTISTS

Kat Mulligan

Wearing the night like a hood, I sit stale and muttering in a fluorescently lit metro car. I do my best to avoid strangers' gazes as the track streams with regrettable sluggishness towards my neighborhood. But with the anonymity of the hour, I am nonetheless free to don any sour expression I may choose. The metro slides into home base, I exit the station with alarming briskness, and the shadow-tinged streets pick at my bitterness until all that remains is its disconsolate skeleton. Onto the church steeple and sidewalk cracks, I project the evening's misfortune—I have been abandoned, or rejected, or belittled, and this midnight affords me no pity. A melancholic caricature, I stare through sore eyes at the moon and, attempting courage, whisper to myself, "What do I care? I am a fine poet." Just like that, on the wings of my verse, I fly above the petty drama of my life as a twenty-one-year-old university student—but this is no release like that of tears cried out in earnest. The ache persists, but is painted over with fragile vanity.

Years ago, before my identity had reconstructed itself out of my poetic habits, I turned to so-called logic and willpower to comfort myself in moments of disappointment. One morning while I was living in the Netherlands, the dress-shirt-and-sweater-clad boy of the hour, in whom I had hastily invested my every romantic fantasy, informed me that he would not be visiting my city the next day due to personal circumstances. After ten minutes of sobbing, I composed myself and drilled these words into my head: "Logically, it would not make sense between us. He lives in another city, and in any case, I decided last month that I had had my fill of yearning." Pinpointing my current emotional state and my desired emotional state, I would hammer in affirmations in order to will myself towards my goal of mental peace. Despite preaching the beauty of the human condition like any high school writer, I found my negative emotions nonsensical and cumbersome. I resisted feeling them to their end, and dreamed of living in control of myself, never projecting unfairly onto others or inflicting undue harm upon myself.

As I have grown into myself and dedicated myself to my interests, my quest for self-control has taken another form. Having

concluded at some point that the true meaning of my life lay in my writing and curiosity, I have begun to use this newfound purpose as a bandage for the wounds brought upon me by the more “vulgar” side of my existence, the side which I normally rejoice in so long as it treats me well and offers itself up to poetic interpretation. For example, I’ll sometimes leave a party sick with insecurity about my shoddy small talk, until I remind myself, “You have written three plays, you are going to write more plays, and no one can take away your right to write plays.” I am soothed by what I imagine to be my life’s work, the accomplishments I will die with which can be enumerated and immortalized on paper, and these fleeting blues suddenly appear less imposing as a result. Once again, I deny myself feeling, and tell my roommate when he asks how I deal, “Now that I read books, these things just roll off my back.”

Other times, afflicted by what I would consider a particularly embarrassing and unbecoming misfortune, I seek solace in the titans of the art world. I ask myself if Yeats wrote *his* love poems about people who, beneath their charm and fantasy, didn’t know what cardinal directions were—the answer is no. His poetry oozed with yearning for the very capable and unattainable Maud Gonne. Surely, then, this lamenting of mine is beneath me, I tell myself. What I fail to remember, however, is that even our long-gone idols lived unromantically from day to day. We see in our life’s breadth, by virtue of it being immediate and our own, every prosaic and unfulfilling moment, and the era in which we live is marked by that same breadth. It is not merely cell phones and corporate architecture that make our life bleak; it is our infinitely dimensional familiarity with life. Romance hides out in privileged moments—it has never constituted the atmosphere, not even back then. And in any case, Yeats was a fascist in need of a muse, which often begins, if not endures, as a hollow archetype propped up by creative self-interest. He, too, embarrassed himself time and time again with his undying affection for Gonne. I could write a poem just as beautiful about a DJ with anger issues, and historians would call it tragic love—and writing it would grant me the catharsis I so often deprive myself of. Comparing myself to esteemed artistic figures from the past is yet another escape from my emotions.

Regardless of the sustainability (rather, the lack thereof) of my technique, it has proven momentarily effective enough to rule over my psyche. If offended by someone who doesn't write poetry, I take to the streets, contemplate my situation, then, before turning into my apartment, remind myself of the poetry that *I* write and that brings me joy and fulfillment—and just like that, I am part of a grander, nobler scheme. This flimsy (and undeniably vain) remedy does not, however, account for those who match or outshine me in my areas of interest. I learned my lesson a year and a half ago, when I dated someone a few years older whom I admired so much as a thinker and creator that I interpreted his approval or disapproval of me as an appraisal of my artistic worth. When he ended our relationship before it ever really took off, it felt as though an implicit reminder that I was not as interesting as I needed to be to match wits with someone truly accomplished (although maybe this speaks to some fear of mediocrity or competitive energy instead). He had dealt a blow to my artistic self-esteem, and, obviously still moored in my ways, my only relief was to somewhat comically produce a list of my best attributes, my accomplishments, and the most story-worthy moments in my life, in the hopes of discovering an equality between us that I had initially overlooked.

At this point, I am much more secure in myself as an arts enjoyer and creator. This has not, however, immunized me against sadness or rivalry. The tricky thing is that, no matter how much I try to override my emotions, I cannot squash my vulnerability; I can only redistribute it. I have triumphed over last year's turmoil, but as long as I assign importance to the creative domain, I am bound to stand in the line of fire of other people's successes. When my best friend at the time, whom I lovingly considered my rival, began dating that admirable thinker and creator, my sensitivities converged at the tenderest point imaginable. I had fallen short of the mark, while she had fallen into favor with him. By allowing peace of mind only as a reward for my competencies, I brought this jealousy upon myself.

Art, in any case, is too unstable to place one's bets on. Artistic self-esteem fluctuates like the tides, for it does not content itself with the cumulation of past achievements. Art is only slightly less digestible than food, disappearing into the abstract once the dopamine has been squeezed from it. Your current artistic output often takes precedence



over your past—the former, if accused of not being up to par, enviously interrogates the latter. To decline, even to stagnate, seems like certain death to the creative mind. The protection that my “Whatever, I read Yesenin” habit affords me depends on my satisfaction with my artistic or intellectual side at any given moment. Negative thoughts cannot be warded off if they emanate from the shield I use to do so.

What solution do I propose then? If I had a concrete answer, this essay would not exist. What I can only hope to convince myself of, is that no manmade thought pattern can usurp the hardwired emotional system that we all possess. Whether we like it or not, we must feel until we reach the bottom of feeling. It is this very lack of a shinier incentive that drove me towards my maladaptive habit, though. If nothing else, I might remind myself that we learn lessons from adversity, and that the substance of what made my creative idols memorable in the first place lay in their struggle with their own and others’ turbulent humanity. Art is compensation for being cut deep, not a preventative measure.



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Amalia Mairet** is a Montreal-based writer, studying English Literature and Psychology at McGill. She likes baking bread, arguing with her roommates, 90s Alternative and pondering the mysteries of the human body.

**Gabriel Lamothe** is a student at Concordia University and an avid reader and writer. He has tried to become more multifaceted in recent years, but always finds himself coming back to the pen and paper.

**Ashley Fish-Robertson** is a poet and journalist based in Montreal. Her work has appeared in *Room*, *Funicular*, *This Magazine*, *Cult MTL*, *The Encore Poetry Project*, and more.

**Patrick Emond-Sioufi** is a Montreal based prose and poetry writer. He is in his final semester of the Creative Writing Major at Concordia University. His writing is interested in the nuances of interpersonal relationships. He promises he is just as much a cat enthusiast as he is a dog enthusiast.

**Johanna Donovan** is a born and raised Montrealer living a life run by her three young children and Mexican husband. She has enjoyed a varied career with writing as the most common denominator since studying English Literature at McGill and Journalism at Concordia. She's had poems published in *The Nashwaak Review* and *The Write Launch*.

**Crowley Klara Jade** is a Montreal-based writer who studies Literature and Religion at Concordia University. In her work you will find Catholicism, lesbians, fruit, and horror all mixed into one— take a bite and enjoy.

**Hannah Vogan** is originally from Toronto, now a second-year student at Concordia, a Montreal-based journalist and poet-on-occasion. She believes we need to start using the term “hark!” more casually.

**diane yeung** is a writer and journalist hailing from Brooklyn, New York. She's lived in Montreal for over a decade, where she currently

studies creative writing at Concordia University and works as an independent journalist.

**Jessica Ward** is a writer originally from Nova Scotia, now based in Montreal with a fierce admiration for dollhouse furniture. She recently graduated from Concordia with an M.A. in Political Science and has since reignited her old flame with creative writing. Her work is inspired by the weird, the unknown, and the uncanny, which she credits to a childhood filled equally with rosaries and ghost stories.

**Ilona Martonfi** is a Montreal poet born in Budapest. She is a writer, editor and creative writing teacher. She is the author of five poetry books, the latest, *The Tempest* (Inanna Publications 2022), as well as seven chapbooks. Martonfi is a recipient of the QWF 2010 Community Award.

**Louise Carson** lives in a bungalow surrounded by gardens. She paid for it by teaching music. Now she just writes. Her poems have been selected for Best Canadian Poetry three times and she's published three collections of poetry. She also writes mysteries and historical fiction. Her latest books are *The Truck Driver Treated for Shock*, haiku, Yarrow Press, 2024; and *The Cat Looked Back*, Signature Editions, 2023.

**Nicolas Viger-Collins** is a Montreal based author. He previously studied Creative Writing at Concordia University. Currently he spends his free time watching as many movies as humanly possible.

**Bronwyn Garden-Smith** is a writer of poetry and short fiction from Ontario who now calls Tiohtià:ke/Montréal home. She is the Outreach Co-Coordinator and an Associate Poetry Editor at *yolk* literary magazine. Her work has been published in *Carte Blanche*, *Garbage Day*, *Goose*, *Acta Victoriana*, and more.

**Rebecca Lawrence Lynch** is a poet and writer trying to be trans in Montréal/Tiohtià:ke. Originally from Halifax and then Ottawa, she hasn't been published elsewhere but she does have a mother who reads her poems "a few times so they can really sink in." Rebecca lives with her cat, Maurice.

**Bryn Robinson** (she/her) is a writer and photographer living in New Brunswick, on the east coast of Canada. Through her writing, she aims to unearth the emotional riches that underpin experiences and find new angles that ask the reader to reconsider their perspective and place. You can find more of her work on her Substack ([brynphd.substack.com](https://brynphd.substack.com)) where she shares essays and poetry that look at the beautiful marriage of art and science.

**Jonah Brender** was born in Toronto, grew up in Ottawa and has been living and studying in Montreal since 2021. He is studying music with a specialization in Jazz at Concordia University. With his poetry and prose, Jonah adds elements of surprise to the everyday in ways that encourage a rethinking of our habits and communities. While writing was his first love, music-making has grown to occupy such an important space in Jonah's life that these two creative outlets now coexist in his practice. Going forward, Jonah hopes to foster a connection between his writing and music-making, so as to forge a path where these two would be intertwined throughout his creative output.

**Delaney MacIntosh** (she/her) is an engineering student who enjoys observing our world's curiosities and trying to understand them through language.

**Santiago Eastman Herrera** is a Colombian ex-DREAMer who is now (happily) working on his Canadian citizenship. He's currently finishing a double major in English Literature and Creative Writing at Concordia after his stint in Mechanical Engineering turned out sour. In terms of literature, he's most interested in what makes people tick: class and racial inequalities, different experiences in the LGBTQ+ community, and the crunchy bits that appear when they all mix.

**Jayde Lazier** (she/her) is a second-year English literature student from Toronto. She loves writing a mix of poetry and journalism pieces and hopes to incorporate aspects of both into her writing for Soliloquies this year! She has worked as an editor of performance programs for the School of Toronto Dance Theatre and is excited to start as a writing assistant this year at Concordia

**Louise van Oel** (rhymes with "pool") is a published writer and Concordia student pursuing a Joint Specialization in English and History. She is Dutch, Swedish, and Canadian, born and raised in Brussels, Belgium. She'll gladly buy you a coffee if you'll listen to her monologue about ancient history and/or Old English literature, and can enthusiastically provide you with more fantasy and historical fiction book recommendations than you'd ever need (or even want). As a writer, she aspires to embody the intersection of Neil Gaiman, Natasha Pulley, and V. E. Schwab.

**Kat Mulligan** is a writer hailing from Richmond, Virginia and a third-year student in Concordia French studies. She has been published in Soliloquies, orangepeel, and others, and looks forward to exploring the publication world and growing as a writer. In her free time, she enjoys learning languages, reading the Eastern European canon, thinking about baked brie and never actually making it, and insisting on interrupting the indoor function to go frolic.