

# 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.

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## FOREWORD

We are so happy to finally be able to release our 29.2 edition. It is also our last issue as Co-Editors-in-Chief, and running *Soliloquies Anthology* this year has been an incredibly rewarding experience. We have had the pleasure of curating two issues—which would have never been possible if not for the overwhelming support from the Montreal literary community. In the face of severe budget cuts, our fundraising efforts managed to keep us afloat and ensure we could continuously highlight diverse and unique writers, from Montreal and from beyond.

We would like to extend our gratitude to our editors, who spent hours combing through and perfecting our submissions, and working alongside our contributors with dedicated care. This issue and the work we've done this year would not have been possible without their work.

Our team has been absolutely outstanding this year. A special thanks to our managing editor, Kat Mulligan, for all the assistance. Our graphic designer, Marianne Boisseau, for reinvigorating our social-media and website, and for creating both of these covers. An additional thank you to our social media manager, Saskia Wodarczak, and our web content manager Olivia Murphy-Major for their efforts.

The content in both of our issues this year challenge what it means to take up space. Our prose takes us into the edges of the cosmos, turning backwards to focus on our digital reality, and later tackles the post-modern issues in the dining industry. Our poetry grapples with questions of intimacy, both in our personal relationships and beyond—going from the edges of the clouds, Decembers, and the icebox.

Our web-content creators, who have been tirelessly working to provide the *Soliloquies* website with new and refreshing work, are also featured in this issue. Here, we go from a trigger-happy gun enthusiast

on a date to eating breakfast with a crow, with incredible writing within and between.

We hope you are able to pull out the care and dedication from these pages that were put into them. Thank you, as always, for reading.

Noah Sparrow & Erin Staley  
*Co-Editors-In-Chief*



# To the other lonely animal *for NP*

Bridget Huh

Call any little brown bird  
a sparrow. A sparrow  
is just what you've been  
waiting for, what you'll wreck  
your voice calling after  
as if it could ever come  
back to you. Open your  
mouth. Push your tongue  
through your teeth until it tines  
into feathers. You don't  
know this yet but there's  
someone out there waiting  
for your wail, someone  
who will always hum back  
at the most hearable hertz.  
They will follow your scent  
trail like a loosed arrow and  
you will catch them by their  
mussed fletching. You will  
know them by the whistling.



# I heard your voice from another room

Tony Cooper

in another town  
miles and seasons away  
where blueberries grow,  
where each step toward  
you left echoes  
first on cedar,  
then in the crunchy young snow,  
then in the cruel wind— a whistling  
tin kettle unattended—  
you didn't hear  
a creaky rocking chair  
and children's feet scuffling on carpet.  
I fell through your front door  
last snowfall; you weren't there—  
you'd been hard of hearing  
and buried for some time.

# Little Cosmonaut

Beth Fecteau

Kudryavka was the second choice, but she still deserved a kindness, and so Doctor Vladimir Yazdovsky brought her home in late October.

She was a small dog, quiet and placid, and did not complain when he put her in his car. He glanced at her, standing on the passenger seat with her paws at the window. Her eyes were wide and bright as she took everything in.

Sputnik 2 had a window, but it was too small. She would not be able to put her paws up to see out of it.

“What are you looking at?” he asked her, stopped at a red light, and scratched the wiry fur behind her ears. Her curled tail swung from side to side. “What do you see out there?”

She looked back at him. He did not know dogs could smile, but she could, and she did.

At home, he led her through the front door, calling out a greeting as it clicked shut behind him.

Tamara came out of the kitchen and wiped her hands on her apron, leaving long streaks of flour. She furrowed her brow when she saw Kudryavka. “What is this? Is that your space-dog?”

“Yes,” he said. He set his briefcase down and Tamara came to help him remove his jacket.

“Vova,” she said, chiding. Despite the gentle admonishment in her tone, she held out a hand for the dog to sniff. Kudryavka lapped at the traces of food on her fingers. “The children will not let us deny them a dog after this.”

The children entered the room as if summoned. They began their usual path – to his side, where he would ruffle their hair and ask them about their day – but stopped short when they noticed their guest.

“Papa!” Yelena gasped. Aleksandr shoved in front of her to get to the dog quicker. “Sasha,” Vladimir said sharply. “There is no need to push your sister.”

“Sorry, Papa,” his son said, but he could not bring himself to look away from the dog. She sat prim and proper next to the couch, her tail wagging softly, as if she was trying to resist the instinct and be on her best behavior.

“What is her name?” Yelena said.

“I call her Kudryavka.” Vladimir called the dog over to them. “Go on, Yela. You can touch her.”

“I have heard people call her Laika,” Tamara said.

“So have I. She has many names.” He watched his children greet the dog.

“Papa, she is *perfect*,” Yelena said, her voice soft with awed affection. She traced the white line of fur down the dog’s forehead – up and down, up and down, so gently.

“We will not be keeping her, will we?” Aleksandr ruffled her ears. There was a tinge of sadness in his tone.

Vladimir was consistently taken aback by how unfortunately perceptive his son was. Barely past his tenth birthday and already attuned to the bittersweetness of the world around him.

“No, Sasha. Kudryavka is destined for greater things.”

“What things?” Yelena looked at him expectantly. “What could be greater?”

“She will be exploring the stars, my dear.” Vladimir smiled at his daughter. “She will be the first animal to orbit the Earth.”

\*

Vladimir pondered this after supper.

He had dragged all the furniture to the edge of the living room, and the children had found a small rubber ball. They rolled it towards Kudryavka over the carpeted floor, and she dutifully chased it. Every second of their game, no matter how small, was a novelty to both the children and the dog. Each playful repetition brought them the same incandescent joy as the first time she had returned the ball.

Truthfully, Albina – their first choice – was the best candidate for the flight. She scored higher marks in her training, and she had flown twice before. She was objectively the right dog for the project. But he and the other doctors had looked at her nursing her three little pups and could not bring themselves to make the decision.

“They are so small,” Gzenko had said. He had looked imploringly over at Vladimir while absentmindedly stroking Albina’s head. “How can we take their mother from them?”

So, since Kudryavka had nobody to miss her, they had chosen to send her away. It was the correct decision.

His wife's voice brought him out of his brooding, as it often did.

"They are going to break something," Tamara said. Her gaze flitted from vase to trinket to picture frame and back.

"Mara, shush," he said, taking her hand. The two of them sat on the couch. He leaned into the cushions, but her back was ramrod straight as she supervised. "It is too cold to bring them outside. They are being careful."

She hummed noncommittally but leaned back.

"The flight is fatal, no?" she asked him. He looked quickly at the children, ensuring that they did not hear, but they were completely absorbed in the dog.

"Yes," he confirmed. "Her ticket is one-way."

His wife sighed. "That is sad."

"Perhaps." He felt the need to defend it, though she was voicing the same doubts he held. "It will provide us with indispensable knowledge. We would not do it otherwise."

"I know," she said. She leaned her head on his shoulder. "It still makes me sad."

He found he could not come up with a satisfactory response. He patted her hand.

Yelena giggled as Kudryavka licked her nose. Aleksandr was smiling at his little sister, a miracle in and of itself, but it called Vladimir's attention to something else.

"They have not fought since I brought her," he said to Tamara.

"I noticed that as well." She smiled at him. "He has not even kicked her."

"Perhaps we *should* get a dog," he said, as a teasing smile spread across his face.

"Oh!" Tamara gasped, lightly smacking his arm. "You are impossible."

He put his arm around her, and they watched their children play with Kudryavka until it was well past their bedtime.

\*

To get back on time, Vladimir had to rise before the sun. Tamara woke to make his breakfast, and they went through the quiet motions of their morning routine.

Kudryavka had spent the night on Yelena's bed. She had thrown an arm over the dog in the night and drawn her closer, and they curled towards each other like parentheses. He stood in the doorway and watched them. He had to leave, but he could afford them one last moment of stillness.

"Why did you bring her here?" Tamara said softly. He had not realized she was there. She must have been watching him watch them; he wondered what she saw.

“What do you mean?” he whispered, barely a breath, suddenly desperate not to wake girl nor dog before their time.

“Why did you bring her here when you knew it would hurt?” She rested a hand on his arm.

He thought before responding.

“So that she would be missed,” he said, and walked to the bed to wake her.

\*

Kudryavka was equally compliant during the car ride back to the launch site. She shivered in the early-morning cold, but did not create any fuss.

She stood on the seat and looked out the window for the entire drive again, though they had completed the same trip not twelve hours before. Her tail wagged steadily and she turned her head to look at every small movement. It was as if every little thing was new to her.

Vladimir parked in his designated spot and turned to look at her. He reached over to scratch behind her ears, and she left her post at the window, turning her attention towards him instead. Her expression was so open, so implicitly trusting. She licked his wrist.

“You have been a wonderful dog,” he said.

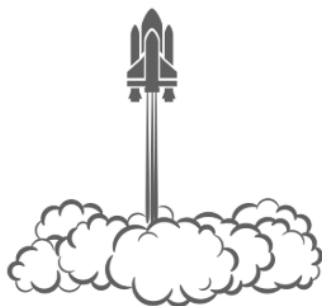
The tiny window on Sputnik 2 flashed into his mind. He wished they could have built her a bigger one, a windshield. That way she could have absorbed every last detail of space with the same delighted focus she granted his commute.



“What would you see out there?” he asked her. “What would you see, my little cosmonaut?”

She pressed her wet nose into his palm and pawed gently at his leg.

There was nothing more to say. They left the car, and he led her to the stars.



## Baby Fat

Saule Konstantinavicius

When I was younger than I thought my memory could reach,  
my mother taught me to make daisy crowns  
on a grassy hill against a sky so big and blue  
that when she leaned back, she almost fell into it forever.

This memory is the type I open my eyes into –  
I remember and step into a body that doesn't yet know what happens next.

I don't remember much of home, but in the pictures  
she looks so young it makes me sad.  
She was not much older than I am now.

There is an undercurrent,  
a white-petalled chain of events  
that keeps my baby fat fingers dug into my calloused palm.

I cannot stay here for long.  
There is a sky behind me, too.

# desired buried, buries me

Hannah Vogan

my mother has dirty lungs: as an embryo i held a shovel, taught to dig  
taught to breathe with dirt in my lungs preparing for the day i would be  
consumed by soil. maybe then (when smothered and packed tight) i would  
sprout something green, fresh and self-sustaining

to live under desire is to ploddingly be killed by the unachievable soil

feel its gentle, mixed-matter weight build from a single granule to rib-crushing  
millions. digging down instead of the impossible up, i plan to strike the earth's  
core and feel the burn of iron and nickel melt my skin, too scorched to sweat  
about the macerating soil. i believed for some time that i stopped digging,  
laid back and basked in the lowly earthworms, counted their five hearts and  
wished my one could beat as strong as their team of cardiovasculars—in that  
wishing i found myself buried, digging and breathing in dirt.

i would die if it meant i could live again.

## Cloud Howe

Jack Forbes

I mean to taste the sea again.  
Let me capture the sun and how  
it bides on my chest.  
Lingering low,  
it glows upon the edges  
of the clouds  
and I cower to caress it.

I wish to let my palms run  
through the breeze. But now  
the weight whirls just  
to swell within me.  
Sand bursts, chasing  
sticks between my feet—  
I'm almost walking in it.

I long to lay my face  
and let the pebbles fall  
deep through the holes  
in my pockets.  
Only I'm too far and far too full  
and can't begin to think to move.

I look back, those hands unknown  
amid my hair, the smell of wind.  
Salt burls me and still, I cringe.  
Blue and boardwalk fade as  
I am pulled from here and then.  
It dances on my eyelids  
I try and glimpse it—just for a second

I mean to live elsewhere  
than in my head.

Yet, I yearn to trace the ink along  
the shore where I was made.  
My mind melts sweeter  
through the blue where I am led.

I reach out with my eyes,  
the waves crawl into my bed.

I reach out with my tongue  
and taste the sea again.



# lost song of the west

Tony Cooper

when the river ran dry,  
ghost horses' hooves once hushed  
by furious currents  
echoed sonorous 'cross cracked earth,  
like crashing thunder drowning a dream.

when hurricane gales flung the big tree  
off the corner of the world,  
spraying dirt and time arcing in the torrent,  
its ancient lurch buried the sound of autumn  
birds lost in the storm.

when the rhythmless echo sang  
through valleys of dandelions, thyme,  
the prairie sky held its breath, still

awaiting initiation  
awaiting the voices of spectres.



# Ronda the Scene Queen

Claire Dooley

The summer before I left for school, I was filled with the malaise of sitting in one place for too long. I had just finished my first year of university online from my mother's living room, and I spent my days serving tables at a vegan Vietnamese restaurant off First Avenue. It was a means to an end, a hallway I was passing through that led to Montreal, my great escape. The restaurant glittered like a marble jewel next to the aging fast food joints that were scattered through the rest of the block, a towering portent of gentrification. It was where I first met Ronda.

Ronda had been famous on Twitter in the early 2010s for being a scene kid. Back then, she had flat-ironed side bangs that covered one of her eyes, highlights as pink as a sunburn, stretched lobes, and circular eyeliner. She listened to crunkcore, deathcore, hard-metalcore, post-punkcore, and emo pop. She barely moved her mouth when she spoke. Her voice was high-pitched and artificially sweet. She said things like *I'm sure nobody cares what I think* while making videos all about what she thought. In the first videos posted to her YouTube account, she was seventeen, still in Jasper, Alberta, where she grew up, still in her final year of high school.

Just over a decade had passed since she'd been known on Twitter as Ronstaar, one-eyed, dangerously thin, hair as black as her soul, but I could still see the scars of old piercings on her nose, and her lobes were still loose enough to fit a dollar through. Her hair was long and brown now, but she dyed two strips in the front in alternating neon shades. She was quiet and observant and made fun of the customers as soon as they were out of earshot. She had a boyfriend named Fergie who was an indie rock music producer. His uniform was made up of

trucker hats and chrome sunglasses and hair that fell in soft, thin waves halfway down his back. When we had drinks on the front patio after work, he would talk over her in the boisterous voice of a teenager. She didn't seem to mind.

I had no inkling of her previous fame until halfway through the summer when she pulled her phone out one day during the slow period between two and four and showed me a photo from the very bottom of her Twitter feed. She smiled mischievously and said that it was her, as if I wouldn't have been able to tell otherwise.

She was posed against a white background, looking up at the camera from under her perpetual side bangs. She wore three necklaces and two tank tops and held the camera with one hand. On the knuckles of the other hand, placed oh-so-casually on her hip, were the letters D-I-C-K in crude Sharpie.

I asked her why she had dick on her hand. She shrugged. She was trying to prove a point, she said. What was the point, I wanted to know. She laughed—a short, small sound—flipped her hair over her shoulder, and went back to looking at Love Island contestants on the work iPad. Her split ends tickled my arm. I wondered how long it had taken her to rid it of the damage from years of heat-induced flatness.

\*

On my walk home that evening, the sky was dipping into dusk. I passed rose bushes escaping through the gaps in fences and bus stops covered in neon graffiti and church signs that pushed psalms into the half-light, illuminating my way. I bent down to pet cats when I saw them. They rubbed against my legs and then disappeared into the shadows again. I wondered about their world of secret passageways and escapes from high places, of immediacy, of necessity. It made me think of Ronda. She



was twenty-nine and I was nineteen, but despite the decade of life between us, we spent our days similarly. Filling ramekins with vegan fish sauces, foaming oat milk lattes, burning our hands on bowls of soup for customers who would never care to learn our names. Shifting through shades of obscurity.

I had school to run away to. I was going to shed that job and leave it wilting on the ground behind me. But for Ronda, years stretched ahead of her there, years of tucking herself away to suit the needs of other people. How did she think her life would unfold when she was seventeen and an internet micro-celebrity? Did she think her Twitter fame would last forever? Did she lean on that digital love like it was as solid as another body? I pictured her face in that photo she had shown me, young and resentful, and I realized how easy it was to be forgotten.

\*

That week, I found myself scrolling through her Twitter account in the breakroom. I swiped past posts about video games and lava lamps and her boyfriend until I found her posing in front of her mirror in only underwear, the same little smile on her face that she'd had in that photo at seventeen: an impermeable smile, a go-fuck-yourself smile, a smile with a secret clenched between its teeth. She had moles scattered all over her stomach. Two red hearts dangled from her belly button.

I kept scrolling down. More video games, more thigh-high socks, more nudity. More boyfriend until there was no boyfriend yet until she was living in Kamloops. One picture from behind, the camera of her phone pointed at her in the mirror so all there was to see was the back of her head. The caption: *Yes, that's my tampon string.* Her in Jasper dressed in camo with a gun in hand, ready to go hunting. And back. And back. And back. The side bangs grew in again. She wore plaid

skirts and neon pink bras and sometimes nothing. Men commented things like *I missed you Ronstaar*. The second to last photo was a boy kissing her on the cheek while she scrunched her nose. Her hair was black again. The date was the twelfth of August, 2012. There was a link to something called DeviantArt in the caption.

My thumb hovered over it. I was uncertain about the ethics of this. The unbridgeable ten-year age gap between Ronda and me was only augmented by the disparity of our economic classes. Observing is just a different word for judging in my mind. Did I really have the right to view her, to bear witness, if I knew I could never understand her?

My thumb still hovered. I could hear Ronda serving customers on the other side of the wall. She said the same thing over and over again, the same recycled verbs of subservience. I felt the void pulsing between us, itching at me, calling me into it. Finally, I pressed down.

The new website loaded with a black background. The site icon was a neon green X messily slashed in the corner of the page. Her bio read: *Ronstaar, look it up;*)

Her gallery had two sections. Under the first one, she had pictures of herself in matching underwear sets, pink mesh and black lace and leopard print nylon. She laid on beds or against tie-dye sheets hung up on walls, always looking over the camera like she was afraid to make eye contact. That was still true when I knew her. I would glance at her and she would glance away, adjusting her glasses or writing down an order. She loved to be looked at but hated to look.

The caption of the second section read: *This is for pictures of me and my ex-boyfriend Gregory*. All of the photos were of them kissing or holding hands and staring into each other's eyes. They had similar

haircuts. His was bowl shaped, straight-black, swiped absurdly to the side. He looked like an unpopular bird of paradise.

One of the final photos in the category was them slow dancing at Gregory's high school graduation. Ronda's eyes were closed. She was wearing a glossy red dress that matched Gregory's tie. She had a stripe of yellow in her hair, bleached but not toned, vibrant and coppery and accidental. Their noses were touching. I couldn't see Gregory's eyes, but I imagined that they were open.

I clicked on the video link at the bottom of the page. Her voice was ragged and painful. She had a cold, she said. She was making the video because she had broken up with Gregory. They wanted different things, she said. She had to brush her bangs out of her eyes every few seconds. She broke up with him, but it didn't really matter who broke up with who, she said.

What struck me most about it was her thick Canadian accent. When I knew her, she spoke like everyone on the west coast spoke, with a kind of forgetful drawl, the impact of the ocean air. But in this video, in which she had not yet graduated high school, her O sounds tilted downwards, and she became identifiable.

\*

On another walk home after a long shift, I kicked clumps of dead grass with my tired feet and passed fast food restaurants that glowed like godly roadside attractions. Kids rode their bikes in circles in the cement yard of the school near my house and I watched as a murder of crows flew above me, a swarm of dark against an otherwise empty horizon. I tried to pinpoint one bird out of the mass but found it was impossible. They moved as one, a great black knife leaving behind nothing but wounded air.

Earlier that day, I had been standing behind the till during the slow period with Ronda beside me when she started to cry. I didn't know what to say. It was strange to see her with her emotions so overt, so honest. It was like looking through a window to a large, open room that I had never noticed before, one whose walls fell into shadow before I could see where they ended. Her face was a perfect picture of sorrow. Little rivers of tears stained the skin under her eyes.

She told me that her dad had just been diagnosed with prostate cancer. Apparently, her mother had called to tell her while she was on break. Did they know if it was advanced? I asked. She shook her head. The tears ran down into her mask.

I wanted to give her a hug, but I had never touched her before. It had always felt like there was an invisible shield up around her, and that disrupting it would break the rules of our tenuous friendship. But she was still crying. I put my hand on her arm and told her that I was sorry. That it would be okay. She shook her head and stared out the window at people passing by. Her arm was slim and cold and very normal. I told her I could handle things if she wanted to take a longer break. She shook her head again. No, she said. She wanted to keep busy.

I took my hand off her arm and let it hang uselessly against my thigh.

\*

Last year, I opened Instagram to a picture of Ronda's dad in front of a big tree in front of a big house. I think it was the one she grew up in. There was a white heart emoji in the caption. I knew what that meant but I didn't want to think about it too much. I never know what to say in the face of grief.

The leaves on the tree are shimmering, caught in the shift from green to yellow. Her dad is wearing khaki shorts with sandals and black rectangular glasses. Some unidentified movement makes his face blur, turns it into a chaos of features, but he's smiling at the person behind the camera. Someone that I can tell he loves. Someone that I can't quite reach. She exists just beyond the edge of my phone screen.

# I mean words

Louise Carson

The walls of the room are green,  
the carpet brown, the ceiling blue.  
The room where I write  
tries to get outside itself:  
it can leave.

Plants and books and flocks of words –  
I mean birds – and two cats.  
(It can leave by that door.)

Young cat calls birds. Old cat sleeps.  
(Or that.)

There's a street with a speed bump  
where everything slows.

And I sit in the blue-green-brown room  
counting birds – I mean words.  
I mean words.

In which I take clippers to every unfinished edge for  
example desire

Bridget Huh

The trees rustle their hands through my hair.  
They say I have been good. Am being good.

They say I need a haircut, and soon.  
They only want to touch somebody.

I want them to tell me if it will grow back.  
If the bluejay, flickering in the foliage,

will still be here tomorrow.  
If the sunlight will still hang

honeyed from the fingerbone  
branches. If the wind will cut

as it always has, if the bark will  
scab over with snow, if

the thief will leave me  
behind, if the slick

ice softening in  
my hands will

stay, if only in  
melt, if only

in memory.  
If this is

what goodness  
takes.

I want them  
to tell me.

N cuts my  
hair, says

I'm holding  
still enough. I

feed them apples  
from a tree I've never

touched. Is it bad to want  
to? When I try to give them

another they stop me, they say  
that's enough. I don't watch them

leave. I swear. I've been good.





# The Last Maple Tree in Tehran

*after 01/79*

Alex O'Neill

clandestinely and intestinally  
you weave your branches  
through wrought-iron gates of diplomatic immunity;

floating opinions into pomegranate skin,  
transfiguring your seeds into jeweled rice,  
organically decomposing what is written in the scriptures.

having fallen leaves mop up a syrupy  
spat of detritus and french toast crumbs,  
after sitting idly from wire-tapping deprivation  
as your brittle bark is consumed for breakfast;

watch in awe as magnetic magicians  
take forks and knives to four hundred and forty-four days of cable  
news;

for ample time is needed to sanitise its footage  
as how a dish washer scrubs a plate  
after full english involvement  
on a sunday morning.

like myself

you benefit from seasonal rain and solitude  
rooted in your compound, romanceless;  
and as you are washed by the sappy air and fed your morning rations  
you ponder  
if you would rather be dead than red  
white  
or even blue.

## Pigeon Feed

Olivia Hornacek

Susannah stared and seethed through the window at her neighbour. Hunched over the pigeons on her building's front step, the old woman was feeding the pigeons, her fingers extending like a magician's. She imagined opening the front door and putting her hands on Mrs. Erikson's green woolly coat and pushing as hard as she could, imagined the yelp the old woman would make as she fell down the stairs, unable to reach the railing. That's what the old bitch would get for feeding the pigeons.

Susannah had hated people before. Jerry Summers, who sat next to her in fourth grade. He used to click a pen incessantly and pick his nose and wipe snot on the table. He would take her paper and hold it above his head so she would have to jump demeaningly to swipe it back. She hated her Aunt Louisa, who always squeezed her cheeks too hard and smelled like dollar store lavender spray. Aunt Louisa, whose idea it was for her parents to cut her off when they found out she stopped attending her university classes in favor of sleeping in. Hate was filling and plump, filling holes and gaps like concrete. Susannah had hated before but she had never hated anyone like she hated Mrs. Erikson's pigeons.

They weren't even Mrs. Erikson's pigeons. Pigeons didn't belong to anybody, they were just there. Rats, people sometimes kept as pets— but pigeons were meant for city blocks and highrise ledges. They were meant to shit on statues and pick at discarded fries. But Mrs. Erikson would scatter feed on the steps so that when Susannah returned to her dingy apartment— this one so unlike the one she had to give up when her parents stopped depositing rent money into her account— she had to wade through pigeons. They were always moving

in the wrong direction, too stupid to avoid Susannah's step, flying too close. Sometimes, she could hear them outside her apartment, the round coos humming through the insulation.

She stepped out of the shared front door, only to have to squeeze past Mrs. Erikson.

"Good morning, Susannah!" Mrs. Erikson called in perfect English, her French accent poking through.

Susannah muttered a good morning in reply, not looking up at her nemesis. She gripped her hate the way a child would clutch a stone, jagged edges digging into soft flesh.

"Are you going to meet some friends?" Mrs. Erikson sounded genuinely concerned.

The concern tweaked anger within Susannah. The words none of your business blared in her mind. She made a sound in confirmation. As she took a step, she felt something flutter under her foot, sending her flailing backwards. She barely caught herself on the railing, cold iron biting into her skin. She stared at the beady eyes of the assaulting pigeon and it cocked its head.

"Oh dear, are you alright?" Mrs. Erikson asked.

"I'm fine." Susannah's face was hot, anger and humiliation mixing in a splotchy red. Before Mrs. Erikson could irk her further, Susannah scurried along. As Susannah walked away, she glanced at the missing cat posters, a pink papered calico pasted over the edge of a faded black fluffy cat. She could see the two cats tearing into the pigeon, teeth digging deep into the grey feathered neck, hind legs

ripping open its belly until the bird's organs spilled out. She felt calmer imagining small cat mouths chewing on the pigeon's intestine.

\*

Susannah never realized how expensive her favourite latte was nor how much her friend Mindy could talk without interruption. The only question Mindy asked her was whether or not Susannah had spoken to her parents— to which she had only shaken her head in answer, unable to elaborate. She told Mindy about the pigeons infecting the space outside of her apartment and Mindy laughed. She told Mindy how it was illegal to feed the birds, that she had tried calling the city, but that all the prompts from the automatic machine were in French. Susannah had tried pressing the numbers at random, hoping to get a person, but had only found more of the soulless voice. Mindy listened with her head tilted, her eyebrows scrunched, and waited for a lull to clear her throat and carry on talking like Susannah hadn't spoken at all.

The birds were waiting for her when she came home for her midday nap. She stared at them, almost in awe at the sheer number of them lining her building's front steps. They cocked their heads, staring back. Occasionally, one would peck a seed. She couldn't help but think of the dust hidden in between their feathers, how dirty they were. They probably carried little bugs, little enough to be mistaken for a speck of dirt that would bite and then bury beneath the skin. She shuddered, disgust filling her so overwhelmingly that she kicked at the first pigeon. It lurched out, leaving enough room for a single foot, and then again for a second foot. She wanted to make contact, wanted to feel the crunch of small bird bones under her foot— but she settled for their frantic movements and a place to step.

\*

Susannah couldn't sleep through a night, awoken at every dawn by incessant pecking on her window sill. She would spend those hours not yet touched by the sun searching online for information about pigeons, but nothing was satisfying. They were infecting her thoughts, her dreams. Her dreams, in which she would see them opening their beaks only to reveal human teeth. They would open and chew and grind the birdseed Mrs. Erikson tossed them.

Susannah tried to take her mind off feathers and beaks and Mrs. Erikson's seed by painting her toenails, picking a jewel toned purple. She used to get manicured and pedicured every other week, but now that she was racking up her credit card limit with no way to pay, she had to paint her own nails. She told everyone that she was job hunting but truthfully she didn't care to try. The thought of handing out resumes made her want to curl into herself like a bug in a magnifying glass. Instead, she used her job hunting time to scrape purple out of her nail beds and crevices. She was smearing a purple streak across her pinky toe when a dull thud came from her window. The offending pigeon's eyes were staring and hollow on her from her windowsill's barren flower box. She was hypnotized by the grey around the bird's neck, a collar that turned iridescent purple and green in the light. Without thinking, she opened her window, letting the frosty air breeze through her apartment, and scooped up the still pigeon to pop it in the freezer. She wondered if Mrs. Erikson would notice the disappearance. She hoped that she would.

\*

"Do you really have to do that?" Susannah's words surprised even herself. The sun had dipped below the city buildings but the sky's dark blue still seemed lit from behind. Susannah had to step carefully down the stairs, gripping onto the frosty railing. She always committed

to a pair of heels when she went out— the amount of sneakers in the club made her stomach turn.

“Oh, hi dear,” Mrs. Erikson spoke over her shoulder, still feeding the pigeons. A moment of silence stretched between them, creeping up Susannah’s spine as she wondered if Mrs. Erikson had heard the question.

“You’re not supposed to feed wildlife,” Susannah said flatly.

“Oh, they’re not wildlife! Pigeons are domesticated animals.”

“Is that recognized, like legally—”

“It’s a common misconception, but really, all pigeons are abandoned pets.”

Susannah bristled.

Mrs. Erikson gazed dreamily at the birds, “Did you know that pigeons always return home? You can bring them an ocean away and they’ll still fly back to where they came from.”

Susannah noticed the purple tones in the deep set creases of her under eye. Susannah had never thought of Mrs. Erikson as having children, more so as someone who had appeared fully formed as an old woman. It made her uncomfortable to think of Mrs. Erikson in another stage of life. She could only imagine a powder smelling baby bird sucking on Mrs. Erikson’s sagging breast, yellow beak cutting into shrivelled nipple.

“Do you often fly home, Miss Susannah?”

“Pardon?” But she had heard Mrs. Erikson’s question clearly. Susannah heard her father’s voice, tinged with anger. Her mother’s sadder, softer tone. She caught herself. “No,” she said. “I don’t tend to fly home.”

Mrs. Erikson looked at Susannah, staring at something just behind her eyes “Well, that is just a shame, isn’t it?”

Susannah tried to look past Mrs. Erikson, but couldn’t tear her eyes away from Mrs. Erikson’s scrutinizing gaze. She imagined driving her foot down on a pigeon, skewering its small head on her black heel.

“I have to be somewhere.” Susannah walked away, unable and unwilling to look back.

\*

She picked a boy to bring home at the party, an easy one she knew had never been called pretty before but was pretty enough all the same. He melted even under her cold attention. She let the door slam and pressed herself up against it so he would kiss her. She let the headboard bang as he fucked her with large thrusts of intention. She wanted Mrs. Erikson to hear, wanted her to disapprove or writhe in disgust. As he got close, he began to moan—oh, oh!— but his lips rounded. Susannah stared on in horror as he cooed.

Afterwards, the condom sat atop the trash can, filled to the brim with white goo that reminded her of pigeon shit. When she closed her eyes to sleep that night, she saw small rings of orange. The pigeon eyes on the back of her eyelids watched her all night.

\*

After she kicked him out, she propped the frozen pigeon upright against her mother's old vase. She wished she could grind it down with her palm till it turned into dust. She wanted to destroy it, eviscerate it. So, she grabbed a wooden cutting board and a steak knife. The frozen skin would be tough; she needed the serrated edge to bite through the flesh. Susannah had, years ago, watched a video of Julia Child breaking down a whole chicken; she remembered it was the French method. She had muted the black and white video—irritated by Child's buzzy high voice, and watched as Child had strategically cut, twisted, pulled and slit along skin to dismember the bird. Now, Susannah wiggled the stiff wing of her pigeon tentatively before ultimately deciding to saw into the neck. The feathers shifted on the body as she gripped it. She pulled the knife back and forth again, pressing down firmly on the forward stroke. She grit her teeth with the effort it took to make it to the spine and jam the knife between the vertebrae. After some hacking, she finally picked up the body and snapped its neck with a satisfying crack. The tension lifted from her shoulders. With a final round of cutting, she severed the head. It was light. She grabbed a Ziploc bag and stuffed the headless bird in. Then, she shuffled down the hall in her slippers to the mailboxes and carefully deposited the pigeon body into Mrs. Erikson's steel box. Back in the safety of her apartment, Susannah leaned against the front door as she closed it behind her. In a fist, she held the head. She squeezed until the beak bit into the skin of her palm. It had begun to thaw. Susannah closed her eyes and pictured putting the small head in her mouth, melting in the warmth of her cheeks. She squeezed it tighter.



## people with breath that stinks

Foster

this winter i had been thoroughly  
decembered  
only now coming out  
of a miasma of anticipation,  
feeling as if i had been dressed in my most formal attire  
but covered in stains.  
one look in the mirror tells me  
my face isn't trying hard enough  
it's asleep on the job.  
i could have been distinctly handsome  
if only my jaw were more defined.  
once, that had been my only trouble in life  
now, i have others.  
in the shower i praise the plumbing  
water has a way of hiding imperfections,  
giving my body  
puffy from late-night ramen  
long, lean lines that glisten  
in the midst of the crowd  
but nevertheless  
i feel alone,  
as if a line has been drawn around me in chalk  
to mark the crime scene.  
inside those lines, i am not judged  
i am invisible.  
a group of kids gave me the stink eye  
i thought, *well hell*  
*they must not have liked what they saw.*  
good thing i'm not trying to be seen.  
this world is full of lonely people  
it's full of desperate people  
half-broken people  
single people  
people with breath that stinks.

one of the little ways you save me  
*a golden shovel after William Carlos Williams' "This Is Just To Say"*

Natasha Lalonde

when I wake in the mountains I  
pull on whatever warmth I might have,  
go to the window to search for what has yet to be eaten  
by the snow. in my searching, I find the  
peaks, sometimes, shining out like plums.  
soft but sour, but dark, which  
reminds me they must be lonely like we were,  
like single spires stretched out in  
the small space between us that we call distance, in the  
little icebox

we call heart. I come away from the window, which  
reminds you to hold me. you  
tell me to wait because you were  
just pouring the coffee and were probably  
going to come sit with me, saving  
me from whatever pit I'd fallen into for  
nothing, sucking on as torment for breakfast.

and I look at you, wanting to forgive  
the stories we choose sometimes, the me  
I sometimes become when my heart feels broken. the they  
we pretend don't exist on days like this. because we. we were  
in the window. you were saying something delicious,  
and kind and moving slowly, so  
slowly through the thick, through the sweet-  
ness of the day. waiting to lift me and  
wrap me up. keep me warm, so  
warm. turn my head back from the peaks in the cold.

# Like Eggshells

Joanna Stathopoulos

in comparison to cosmic debris.

Though comically different, recognizable still

Like new matted interior cars hold the same smell and atmosphere as  
covid testing sites in children's hockey arenas

The similarity, can you taste it?

Like sucking on a coin,  
on an antibacterial wipe

It's all here, and one, and yet  
you're surrounded by  
endless papers to sign,  
boxes to check,

bounded by jargon, jargon, jargon  
as it becomes harder to hold onto fantasies that escape aspects of  
constant paperwork,  
outside of bills and burning petroleum.

Empty glove boxes. Coal.

Can I just sign my name as everything?

And this isn't voice at all

it's erasure, once essence

slipped and scattered across these bleach tiles that burn your nose hairs like the sting

like that climbing ring in your ears when you're about to cry,

just to remind you it's there once again

Could you even name them all? If you were to be blindfolded  
and taken you down the strange streets you feel so much ownership over?  
Are we made so delicately, so unstable, to feel emotions towards pavement?  
We are flawed things, you must admit  
Where is that from?

As you try to be separate and become just one, you become no one  
To be no one and everyone one too many times.  
Why not just be endless for once?  
Like space light in comparison to the highlight on your cheek, like veins and intersections, like,  
like, like

Like everything you've ever known will be brought back to you someday  
And how strangely free and fine it is  
to look at these white broken eggshells  
and not be able to tell where they end.  
The gears,  
they can cradle me now

# Bay Street Video Store

Taro Williams

Hold me close  
At the DVD video store -  
Beneath the stacks

Catalogues of movies behind the plastic covers  
Between the 'LGBT' and 'Adult Only' sections

In here, It smells like film roll cleaner  
Bright carpet floors  
the same technicolour surfaces from the 90s  
- Or, maybe even the 80s

Touch me you cinephile freak!  
Grab my ass while 'Amélie' (2001) stares at us,  
I don't care if the nosy staff see anything

Here, I am with the 'Misfits' (1961)  
A kind voice trained in American method acting  
Calling out to me  
from behind the silver screen,

*"I am craving an imagined future - that never came,  
I am yearning for a nostalgic past - that never existed."*



# Shuffle Plates; or, New-Age Yakitori

Jackson Dunnigan

Slinky's is a rectangular module chiseled out of an uptown commercial precinct. Chapter-7 artifacts return with fresh paint, lacquer, and heaps of disinfectant. I remember these bones. A granite countertop outlines the open kitchen penetrating the hall forming an L-shaped dining portion with dedicated M and F bathrooms on the hooks of its top serif. There are many crooked chairs and peeling leather booths, yet just a single square table halfway up the L's stem. We are guided to it. I take the booth side, Garret, the chair. A coaster wedged on the floor keeps it mostly level. White napkins and red plastic cups are soon placed Ponziani style. The hostess is exchanged for a near-identical waitress.

"Have you folks been with us before?"

"Me, of course, and Ruth?" Garret points toward me, a queue to speak.

"No. I haven't," I say, squeezing my words.

"Oh Garret, she's just adorable," puckers the waitress, like Garret built me himself.

"Well you see." Garret joins her 2v1. "If you look around, we here at Slinky's do things a little different. Have you two ever had Small Plates?"

"A few times yeah."

"Good-good. Well here we do Shuffle Plates."

"Shuffle Plates?" I try confirming with the waitress but in the blink of an eye she's gusted gone. "That was rather rude of her."

"Rude? They just do things a little different here."

"Different?"

"I'm talkin' different, different."

I nod. We drift to silence. Inspecting the menus, periodically looking back up at each other with false starts to new conversation.

"So what looks good?" Garret passively queries.

"I mean, the Katsudon's intriguing."

"Katsudon!" he squeals. "At New-Age Yakitori? That's entry level, Ruth."

"How is getting something different from a restaurant's specialty entry level?"

"Well Ruth, it's a bit more complicated than that. You see—"

"ACHEMM." The waitress clears her throat, akimbo plates of meat and veg arrive skewered and steaming, sparingly sprinkled with sesame and scallion. "I have a Negema?"

"That'll be me!" Garret smacks the menu in front of him, licking his lips.

"And so that means the Reba is for—"

"Ruth!" cheers Garret.

"Enjoy!" The waitress clamps the plates atop the menus, then pulls the menus out like meat off a skewer.

"You ordered already?"

"Ruth. With Shuffle Plates you place ahead!"

"Then why did you let me try to order?"

"Cause it's New Age Yakitori!"

I smile, trying my hardest to stay dainty and still, pinching then pulling a singular morsel of meat off a scorched wooden skewer. A sharp hit of soy precedes a slight metallic funk, bitter char, and sweet caramelized glaze. The meat's a little chewy, though not necessarily unpleasant, just slow. By the time I get down a single Morsel, Garret's cleared himself a skewer and a half as if his time's running thin. Another couple comes inside, stomping the mud off of their boots. The hostess greets them warmly before seating them at the facing chairs of a tableless table adjacent to the L's bottom serif. Garret makes a pointless comment about their lack of table, but I'm more interested in figuring out what "Reba" is. Diving in for another morsel, a loud thud rattles every fork against its associated knife, making me notice first a certain white-washed lack of chopsticks, then second the questionable need for cutlery when eating off of skewers. A second thud flakes drywall off the ceiling, the water in our cups spits up twin drops. A third thud swings open a door beside the bar, revealing an abyss from what I thought to be a different module of the precinct, and from the darkness, an oiled-up brute wearing a spaghetti stained beater bears a massive table on his shoulder like a wrestler's folding chair. He slams it down the center of the dining hall, reverberations rattle all the way back past the restrooms. He lets out a firm growl before approaching us.



"Is everything okay?" I ask.

Garlic breath passes through his nostrils like a dragon. He grabs both of our plates, slamming them down on the new center table. He returns, gripping both ends of our table but doesn't lift it. Hinting, dint of sneer, that we're forgetting something—

"CUPS!" shouts Garret. "Cups and cutlery!" he yells, lifting his up off the table as I follow suit.

The brute slams down the table in between the new guests, the waitress brings them cups, cutlery identical to the ones me and G. hold awkwardly in front of us. He slides them the very same menu we once ordered from. My downward gaze is intuitively drawn to his crotch, I tighten my posture to realign with his eyes.

"Now what?" I ask.

"We talk!"

"About what?"

"I don't know... movies!" he cheers, sniffing sharply.

"Movies?"

"The distraction is gone, we can talk about art!"

"And we couldn't before?"

"It's different Ruth. All we could talk about was food."

"I'm just wondering, do you know when our food is coming back?"

"Ruth, we talk!"

"Okay you start." I say, rolling my eyes.

"What's your favourite—but first! How 'bout that Liver!"

"Liver?"

"The Reba! Skewered livers Ruth! Isn't it wonderful!"

Nausea fills me. I swallow my thoughts and exhale. The hostess adds a numbered tag to our food in the center.

"Look at it there. What if we just get it ourselves?"

"GET IT? That's disrespectful Ruth! New-Age Yakitori culture's about self-control."

"But what about Shuffle Plates?"

"Shuffle plates is just a method of exploring NAY Ruth."

"Nay?"

"No yes!"

"Yes?"

"YES! It is New-Age Yakitori, you got it Ruth!"

A bell rings in time with the delivery of skewers for Table-2. A third group soon enters, a family of 5, 3 daughters, the first 2 don't look like twins but they're dressed like twins; they might be twins. They're brought to the corner table right in L's heel, and in perfect rhythm just

as the third child sits, the behemoth's door swings again and he stomps to Table-2. He snags their skewers, and slams it on the central table next to ours. The hostess slides a #2 tag behind it just as the table's slammed in front of the family. All the girls cheer in excitement.

"Don't you just love the energy here?"

"I mean, it's neat, sure. I'm just kinda hungry."

"Self control, Ruth."

An older couple enters, the hostess seats them right beside us, swiftly dropping skewers for the parents and chicken fingers for the children, the lot begin to chow. The giant starts to walk towards the family's table over, though before he can connect, another trio creeps in through the vestibule to dodge the pounding rain; the hostess looks visibly stressed; the giant sees the trio in his way and plucks the shortest, pitching him across the ever growing flight of dishes it's considered "wrong" to touch. With a firm grip he rips the food from the family, slamming their table in front of the elders. The girls begin to cry; the hostess seats the group of 3 while the wife portion of the older couple thanks the beast dearly with a soft shakiness to her hands. The hostess runs the kids some colouring sheets and crayons. The mammoth man blushes at her gratitude. Double Katsu Don lands on the table, I make a joke about them being "basic" though the deeply fascinated Garret doesn't seem to hear, or does but doesn't care. Before a single bite is grabbed, the beast steals it, then soon, the table, gone. The hungry husband grows curmudgeon, enraged, leaning towards us for reassurance he's not crazy.

"You see 'at? Y'all see how he just took my plate?"

"It's Shuffle Plates, sir."

"Shuffle Plates?"

"Like New-Age Yakitori," I append.

"Ohhhh... okay."

"It happens sir. People make mistakes."

"Th-th-thank you young man." A single tear of joy runs down his cheek.

A party of 12 seeps inward. Though before the hostess seats them, the mastadonically-gargantuan-mammoth-brute approaches the serif boys out front, stealing their table, slamming it back in front of us, alongside our now room-temperature skewers.

"And so we feast again!" shouts Garret.

"Liver be damned!" I giggle for some reason, shoving the maximum morsel of mass down my gullet where it's gone for good.

Garret growls like a dog, elbows wedged firmly in the table, plowing down 3 and change in the time I plow a single. Just as I reach to put down the empty skewer, an uncomfortable rubbing sensation tickles my fingers, I took up to see the skewer slide all by itself, trailing its path, I see the beast from yonder pluck it out my hand, setting it atop the plates he's took already, in addition, the table. I'm brought back to Garret's crotch which brings me up to his smile, clown-like and sticky, sauce smeared up to his dimples. I feel compelled to look away, 4 more groups wait at the front, another 3 seated while we ate; flames shoot out the kitchen; the girls at the corner use their laps as tables, struggle to colour and struggle to get just a single straight line. Filled with anger and a serious void of chicken fingers, what I assume to be

the non-twin one lances a crayon at the giant's forehead. His eyes ignite with rage. I watch catharsis, then regret, then outright terror fill her beady eyes as the ogre storms at her at his slow but daunting pace. The hostess sees him, hops his back, and rubs a feather 'neath his nose. He collapses to the floor, in an instant fast asleep. The rebounding ripple sends the now 20-something center stacked plates soaring ceiling high. Everyone covers their faces, scared a skewer may pierce their own flesh morsels. A silence fills the room, prompting me—and slowly others—to open our eyes and cheer as plates land exactly where they started.

"You see Ruth, a big part of NAY, is the show. It's all a performance! Scripted, y'know? The behemoth bartends at Gobble's."

"Have you been to Gobble's?"

"No."

"Then how do you know this—"

"SHHH! He's rising." G. and many more stiffen up and stand guard.

"FEAR NOT!" shouts the hostess, massaging his neck before a kiss on the cheek brings him back to good spirits. He returns to work, pries the table, slams it down at another spot. Center plates begin to pile on top of others, prompting duel dishwash jockeys to roll out another table the beast can slam dishes on. I see construction workers, even a rodeo clown, all scattered throughout. Amidst all the shuffling, I try to get a glimpse at our food, though the crowd is so huge, I just see a mass of flesh. Looking out the window, the line wraps around the block, I get a hunch they want us gone. Just as I think this, the waitress approaches, card reader in hand, with a true look of despair in her eyes.

"As you may know, it's a little busier than usual tonight."

"Sure is," giggles Garret. "If we knew it would get busy like this we would've booked a Confidence."

"Yeah so, about that... it's looking like it's gonna be a 30 minute wait."

"30 minutes?" I question.

"Given all the guests, we realistically can't shuffle you your dishes for at least another 30."

"We can just eat off our laps if we have to."

"Even so, it's looking like a 30 minute wait."

"Whatever. Can we just get the bill then?"

"The bill—yes!"

"TWO BILLS THAT IS." Garret interjects.

The waitress prints my bill, thanks us for coming, and sets it on the nothing. It falls slowly to the floor in a zig-zag motion.

## Between Hours, Between Teeth and Tongue

talia ducat

Walks in. Climbs over loose limbs, slips through borders.  
Noise is nasty and the purple light reflects a certain something  
In everyone. Removes jacket. Whispers. Waits for a response. [...]  
Gives the performance of a lifetime in the meantime. Whispers again,  
*This chorus is so sly. What a gorgeous collective improvisation!*  
The song captures the pluperfect cleave between talking and *talking*,  
filling that loud silence like filling a jam jar with a cannonball. I tease,  
*Go there, go there, do it! Go there. Mmmm, yeah, go, I dare you!*  
Because he is thinking so hard about his outcome, because his mind  
Is full of an unrelenting ecstasy, half-imaginary half-blasphemous...  
Because of all this, the fence does not seem so high to him. *See? And!*—  
Walks out. Jacket on again. Finds the next thing to be done. A quiet  
Suspicion of unreason, a lack of direction. Another slug is a form of  
The winter winner's gloating down the hatch. Grinds sludge and dirt into  
Wooden planks. Grinds precursors from front to back. *Please*, he begs.  
And why of course forgetting all I laugh until I'm drowning out the music  
Is the insurgent vessel of de-mystification, touching my ugly nerves.  
Speaks but pretends he doesn't mean it. Like a dirty trompe l'œil—*Speaks*.

## WEB CONTENT ARTICLES



## Don't Go Vacant, Baby...

Spencer Diver

Through the haze of mp4 compression, the splotches of umber, olive drab, and pallid grey are like a perverse coral reef, an ecosystem of vast, strange structures on which every crevice holds some form, or former form, of life. The trenches web through the ground like a bustling terrarium, giddily ushering each man through the field, inch by inch. The sandbags are their only protection from what lay outside the habitat, wards that do little to save one from the intense spectacle of near death—a tasteful *memento mori* to keep them dialled in.

The lens blurs as the drone moves away from its home, the whirl of its tiny engine raising a few semitones. It pushes past the trees, barely escaping the potshots from 5.45x39mm, and arrives at a bare open field, whatever flora it once had overtaken by a new stagnant ecology: bullet casings, deadwood, artillery shells, corpses, ammo belts, and AFVs, IFVs, APCs, and MRAPs. The drone halts on one of them—a T-62. It's scorched and pockmarked with small arms fire, though seemingly in working condition. It was abandoned in a hurry; belts strewn across its body and its hatch left open. The treads are caked with mud. Metal grates and wooden pallets are propped up on their sides. The drone becomes a vulture, circling around the remains until it finds its morsel to scavenge—under the tank's rump, there's a small indentation in the earth. From the distance the drone's at, and the speed it's going to prevent itself from being shot down, it's barely visible on camera. But it's visible enough. The drone banks left, then rights itself over the pit. After a pause, a quick release mechanism drops an American-made M67 hand grenade. The camera pulls back as the explosive nestles itself perfectly into its target. Deadwood rends apart as black smoke brushes over the tank's carapace.

A jump cut. Another explosion, this one managing to fall just onto the edge of the dugout. It's unclear whether whatever creature is hidden under the crevice is still functional, until a small spade reaches out from the pit, an entrenching tool as a last resort to prevent the shrapnel from lacerating their hands and faces. Another jump cut, another plume of smoke. And another. The infantry arrives, though the drone doesn't see their movement, only the brief beams of light from the tracer rounds scattered across the desolate field. A final cut, this time right in front of the pit. A man with a forest-green tactical jacket and Timberlands approaches and lobes another grenade into the pit. He scurries away, and the pit doesn't respond. The man returns to the pit, hesitantly at first, then with more confidence when he sees the carnage he's caused. Said carnage is blocked from our view, as a mosaic blur is placed over the pit.

Peter takes a bite of his egg salad sandwich as the soldier empties a magazine into the pit. As the scene switches to a village raid, he takes off his headphones and opens his word processor, recording a few errant thoughts in lengthy bullet points on the practical necessity of drone warfare in the modern urban theatre. He absentmindedly takes a peek at the statistics page of his Substack, making a soft hum of approval after noting a new bump in sign-ups. His subscription-based blog, *Kinetic Engagements*, has been steadily increasing its readership in these last few months, with an engaged audience excited to hear his insight on counterterrorism operations, reviews of the newest military hardware being deployed to front lines across the globe, and de-escalatory invasions. His blog received co-signs from a number of military tactics outlets, with magazine *Force Multiplier* describing Peter as “the premier news source for up-to-date and detailed combat info written by a civilian.” After responding to a few comments about some new NATO infantry rifles, he pulls himself onto his feet and walks to his bathroom.

Peter carefully redefines his facial hair into a neat goatee, and plucks a few stray nose hairs before taking a step back and examining himself in his bathroom mirror. More readers means more attention from podcasts and content creators, which has made him more aware of the signs of his late thirties: a sagging stomach and neck, and the retreating follicles on his crown. Grabbing some gel, he slicks his hair back, doing his best to consolidate troops over the top of his head. After enough futzing about, he's ready to leave.

He pulls a pair of cargo pants and a soft shell jacket out of the pile on his bedroom floor, throwing them over a greasy t-shirt and two-day-old boxer briefs. His jacket is his favourite item he owns, a black tactical garment specially designed to resist anything—wind, rain, and bloodborne pathogens. He unzips the pockets on his left arm to place a folding knife, then a zipper near his waist, giving him direct access to his Kydex concealed carry holster, where he pushes his Kimber Custom 1911 into place with a satisfying click. He had purchased it at a gun show two years back, enamoured by its sleek chrome finish and its custom wooden grips, which were emblazoned with a condor, wings outstretched, swooping downwards.

The SUV makes a calming ping as he presses the engine button off and opens the door. an empty Pepsi bottle that was hastily stuffed into the side holder pops out and rolls onto the street, where it is promptly crushed by a Civic. The midday sun beats down on Peter, and he is overwhelmed by the sounds of summer—the loud conversations, the cheery yacht rock piped out from patios, and the incessant buzz of the cicadas. Pushing open the door to his local cafe, *Mow-Shun!*, he spots who he's looking for, a serious-looking woman with a purple notebook and a laptop. Peter pauses for a moment to collect himself. He rehearses his greetings internally, and notes that he should remember to mention his upcoming seminar for premium members on

the growing use cases for Improvised Explosive Devices. The woman looks up from her laptop, gives a polite smile, and waves him over.

“Caroline Sumner,” she says, her hand outstretched. He takes it. It’s cold, yet supple.

“Peter Breshinsky,” he replies, flashing his best smile which reverts to fear as his chair screeches against the linoleum floor.

She waits for him to sit down.

“It’s a pleasure,” she says. “The team can’t stop reading your stuff. You have a real knack for sourcing.”

Peter looks down, embarrassed by her flattery and still thinking about how her hand felt.

“You’d have to thank my sources for that,” he says.

It’s a false humility she can easily see through. “Save it,” she laughs. “You know the props you get from the community. You and me probably have the same sources, and I can’t get half of what you can. You have a gift.”

Peter blushes. They run through the hot topics of the month, giggling about a failed Naval assault that led to the destruction of two aircraft carriers on the Black Sea. She pushes her glasses further up the bridge of her nose. Peter notices the fine shape of it, slightly Slavic with a small bump at its top. It reminds him of the girls he would fawn over in high school, the ones that he glimpsed in between the pews during Sunday service, the ones he wished would look back at him. He stutters a moment, but she waits for him to speak, readying her pen.

“I guess I’m curious as to what got you into...” he waves his arms desperately. “All this.”

She gives a slight smile and turns her head down, streams of strawberry blonde hair shimmering against her cheeks. “Me and my father were very close, especially after my mother fell ill,” she says.

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“It’s alright, I was very young when it happened. Dad was a Marine, so we would go to the range pretty often to give him an excuse to hang out with his war buddies. He used to tell me ‘ain’t nothin’ given me a reason to keep pushin’ than a drill sergeant on my ass!” She mimics a gruff Southern accent, smiling to herself. “It all started from there. I remember when he got me a bright pink .22 for my sweet sixteen.”

“Must have been a great moment.”

“Hell no, I wanted something way more powerful than that. If he really wanted to get me a good gift, he should have gotten a 12 gauge.”

They both laugh, and Peter watches the crinkles around her eyes as she smiles. After catching himself, he forces his eyes away.

“What about you?” she asks, turning a page in her notebook. “I read you were thinking of joining the navy, but had some issues due to health.”

“Yeah, it was an eye issue. It was tough for a while, that was my plan out of high school but when it fell through I was, I don’t know, drifting for a bit.”

“Still reading about it all, though.”

“Oh, yeah. The interest never died. Lots of forum posts arguing about stuff.”

She chuckles, then looks down at her laptop, scrolling through a few pages. “Now that you mention it, I never managed to find what the eye condition was.”

“Ah, I don’t remember the name of it exactly.”

“You don’t remember?”

“They always have those weird long medical names, as soon as I heard I couldn’t serve, I kinda tuned everything out.”

She pauses to write another note down, and Peter takes the opportunity to observe her again, this time her slender fingers manipulating the ballpoint, her nails painted a satin olive drab. Caroline looks up, quicker than he imagined she would. He thinks he notices a brief raise of her eyebrow, but it was too quick to be certain. He gives her a slight awkward smile. She shifts her weight in her chair and grabs the edge of the table, slightly lifting herself before telling him she has to run to the bathroom and completing the push onto her feet.

Peter waits, tapping nails on the hard, glossy finish of the table. His thoughts slosh around his head violently, pushing and pulling him endlessly to every possible action and consideration. Does she want him? The possibility arises within him, unshakable. He wants it to feel invigorating, but it just feels sickening. He feels the crown of his head come presently into his mind. It feels like the hair is retreating even quicker. He catches himself in the grainy reflection of a chrome coffee machine. The loose skin around his eyes and neck remind him of the trenches he watched this morning cutting off the supply lines of the youth he used to take for granted. The pressure in his body keeps building.

Peter bolts up and rushes out of the cafe, smacking his thigh into a table and causing a flat white to fall onto a customer's lap. He

walks past his car and heads straight down the block, either unaware or uncaring of any pedestrians or oncoming vehicles around him. He finally slows down in the middle of a business park, heaving and gagging. He steadies himself on a bench and waits for his body to maintain equilibrium, tilts his head back, and stares at the blue sky, now tinted orange.

The clouds are wispy, but in dusk light they appear dark, rolling across the sky like the smoke plumes of a grenade. He keeps walking, past the glass complexes and chic sandwich shops. He observes his figure in the glass— hunched over, flabby, balding, panting like a dog. He removes the folding knife from his pocket and holds it close to his face with trembling hands, but thinks better of the idea and tosses it into a nearby trash can, continuing his walk.

Fiddling with the zippers on his jacket, Peter weaves through the business park, but is brought to a standstill. In the distance, between two massive glass structures, Peter can hear a faint yelling. Although he can't make out the words, the tone is clearly aggressive. Peter approaches, and the yelling rises in both volume and aggression. He can clearly hear two men, but their speech is slurred, making it impossible to parse. Peter reaches the alley where the voices are shouting from, and is met with almost complete darkness. The alley is sealed away from the dusk sun, with only vague shapes struggling to keep a stable form. The figures hardly look human, more like two single cell organisms thrashing against each other. Peter is frozen in front of the darkness, listening to the shouts get louder and more violent. He wants to shout, but he worries for his own safety. What if they're crazed junkies, or one of them is a killer?

One voice lets out a sharp cry of pain. Peter staggers. The cries get more frequent after the first, and more desperate. Peter unzips the side panel on his jacket, placing his hand on the familiar steel of his

Kimber. He presses the quick release on his holster, and the pistol slides smoothly out. The cries of pain are joined by the dull thud of flesh on flesh. Peter points his pistol into the darkness, and fires a shot. Then another, then six more. He presses the magazine release and the empty mag clatters to the ground. He listens. The alley doesn't respond.

Peter switches his pistol's safety on, turns on his heel, and walks back from the direction he came from. The whole walk back to his car, he stares down at his empty Kimber. The chrome barrel gleams in the late-day sunshine, as do the polished grips. He imagines the condor swooping down and landing on top of him, picking his body clean, starting with his balding crown. He returns to the men in the alley, and tries to determine what they might have been fighting over. *No matter what it was, he thinks, I saved them from it.*

For the first time in a while, he allows himself to feel a full-throated pride. The sun finally starts to set as he reaches his SUV and the engine purrs into life. Opening his phone, he composes a quick note of apology to Caroline Sumner, along with an invitation to dinner. The grenade clouds slowly disperse in the auburn sky, and the cicadas buzz like a drone taking flight.



## Neighbours

Olivia Murphy-Major

After James' mother died, he stayed in her old house. At certain times during the day or night, he sat in a lounge chair by his bedroom window and watched the neighbours. It was late March; the ground was beginning to thaw, and the tree branches were decorated with tightly furled buds. It was warm enough to be outside, but early enough in spring that the leaves had not yet filled the trees. In mid-summer, when the forest was lush, he could not see the neighbours, only little diamonds of colour—the pale yellow panels of the house, flickers of the green washboard shutters. Now he could see straight through the trees and into their windows, their yard.

The Bensons were an old couple. James guessed they were in their seventies, but Ray Benson still worked as a plumber. His wife, Evelyn, hardly ever left the house. In the early evenings, Ray sat outside alone. James watched him—his old, sun-reddened skin, his baseball cap over his squinting eyes. He always sat in the same white plastic chair and threw the ball for the dog. James sometimes walked down the driveway, pretending to check the mailbox at the very end. He would look over at the Bensons and give them a nod, trying to acknowledge them, but they always pretended not to see him. They only turned their heads a little in the other direction and carried on doing whatever it was they were doing. James decided that maybe they thought it was polite.

James only left his room when he had to. Otherwise, he watched the neighbours or lay in bed thinking. He often thought of being a child. He went over what he could remember from childhood in his mind. Sometimes he tried to picture his mother's face as it was years ago. He could not recall her face with absolute clarity, and it frightened him. He remembered the Christmas parties they used to have—the frothy eggnog, and the ribbon candies, their garish colours

in a big crystal bowl. Falling half-asleep in his mother's lap as the evening wound down, his ear on her chest, listening to the underwater sounds of her voice. Her warm, perfumey smell along with the thick scent of wine. She was rarely ever cross with him. Except one day, James remembered, as a child, when he went down to the river. He had gone into the backyard, down a narrow path between the trees. His mother had warned him against going there alone. *A little boy died there once*, his mother had told him. It had been a day after rain, when the river was fast and pale with mud. *Whoosh*, James' mother had said, sweeping her fingers past his eyes. He had to see it. He lowered himself down the bank, gripping the trees, his fingers stiff with cold. He lost his footing and slid down until a jagged piece of ice caught on his pant leg. It ripped through to his leg and made a long slice down his thigh. He found his way back home. His mother dressed the wound carefully, but she was quiet with anger. Every night for weeks afterward, James ran his thumbnail down the cut. He had wanted to have a scar so that he would remember. Now it was long and white, like a fishbone.

James thought and slept and had the same dreams each night. Dreams where he would venture out of his room and find things shrinking and moving, coming to life—the dining room table the size of a quarter, the hall mirror reduced to the size of a peephole in a door. They said urgent and unintelligible things to him. *What's happening?* he would ask, and no one could answer.

\*

Later that week, James emptied a can of soup into a pot and heated it over the stove. Once it was ready, he took it into his room and sat in his chair. He looked through the Bensons' windows, which, in the bluish dusk, were perfect boxes of light. They had the TV going. He could make out the television screen and beyond the living room, into the kitchen. He could not see the Bensons but he knew they were there,

sitting on the couch together. He was desperate to hear what they were saying to each other. He wondered if they spent a lot of their time in silence. He wondered about knowing someone for that long. James spooned soup into his mouth, without stopping, the food warming his throat. Eventually the Bensons turned off the television. They put the remotes on the TV stand as they always did, arranging them in a neat little row, and then they went up to bed. When their light went out, James waited awhile in the chair and looked at the quiet house. He leaned over and set his elbows on his knees, holding his face in his hands. He rocked back and forth and brought his fingers up to his temples and pressed them there. Then he got up, walked into the kitchen and rinsed his bowl. He poured himself a glass of milk and drank it. He went to the bathroom, brushed his teeth and spat into the sink. In his bedroom, he turned the lights out and watched the trees outside his window, swaying as the wind went through them. He could hear the wind whistling through the window screen. He fell asleep thinking about the trees, their roots deep in the ground, tangled and sprawling in the dark.

The phone rang at ten o'clock in the morning. James rushed over and picked it up.

"Hello?" he asked, holding the receiver slightly away from his ear. His voice was hoarse.

"Yes, hi. This is Ray, from next door. Do I have the right number?"

James was quiet.

"Hello?" Ray said.

"Hi, yes, I'm here. Yes, you have the right number."

“Good. I found your number in the phone book. I’m calling ‘cause we’ve got a potluck happening tonight and my wife thought I should see if you wanted to join us.”

A silence fell between them. James looked down at his arms, his black shirtsleeves, and began picking lint off of them.

“Oh, that’s very kind of you,” he said, “Sure I’d like to come.”

“Alright. Like I said, starts at five o’clock.”

“Ok,” James said, “I’ll be there. What should I bring?”

“I dunno,” Ray said, and then, sounding farther away, “Honey, what should he bring?”

James heard a murmur on the other line, then a shuffling sound, then Ray’s voice again.

“She says something sweet. A dessert. But no trouble if you don’t bring anything. It’s short notice.”

“Ok, thanks a lot. I’ll see you later.”

“Yup.”

James went to the store and bought a frozen apple pie. He put it in the oven until it was cooked through, the edges browned. At a quarter after five, cars began to drive up and accumulate along the length of the Bensons’ driveway. James waited at his window until there were five cars, and then he got up from his chair, put on a button-up shirt and slacks, and walked outside. He considered crossing over to their yard through the tree line that separated the houses, but thought better of it. He walked all the way down his own driveway and then all the way up theirs. When he arrived, there were two children taking

turns chasing each other in the lawn as the dog ran between them, and several other children were jumping on a trampoline. There were people standing together beneath a blue tent. The aluminum bottom of the pie tin warmed his hand.

“Welcome, welcome,” Evelyn said, holding both of her arms out. “I’ll take this,” she said, grabbing the pie with one hand.

“Thank you,” James said, “thanks so much for having me.”

“Of course,” she said, smiling at him. James noticed her yellowed teeth.

“Now Ray’s just inside,” she continued, “but he’ll be out in a minute and maybe you can help him with the grilling. We need to get these burgers going.” She snapped her fingers with her free hand.

“Sure, I’d be happy to,” James said.

“Let’s go set this down,” she said, holding the pie.

She turned and James followed behind her. Her gray hair was done in a long braid down her back, and it swung as she walked. She set the pie down on a white table beneath the tent, where bowls and containers of side dishes were wrapped with foil. Evelyn arranged them beside one another. He could smell something cooking and felt himself getting hungry. Under the tent, people gathered in a circle. There were couples with their arms around one another. They were laughing. A few of them looked over at James and he looked quickly away.

“There we go,” Evelyn said.

“Could I use your restroom?” James asked.

“Oh sure, just go up into the house, take a left when you get to the kitchen and it will be right there.”

James thanked her and walked up into the house. He came into the entryway and looked around to make sure no one was there, and then he walked into the kitchen. It was not quite how he had imagined it. He saw the familiar wall with the television which he could see from his own window, and he saw the couch, which looked deep and velvety. He walked over to the sink and picked up the wet sponge that lay beside it, then set it back down. He looked under the sink where all the cleaning supplies were stored. He went over to the dining room table and ran his hand over the tablecloth, which was stitched with outlines of birds. He touched their wings, their crowns of feathers, and felt they were alive somehow. James turned away and went over to the fridge. He opened it and took account of what was there. Breakfast sausages, a bowl of fruit salad covered with cellophane, a bottle of mustard, a carton of eggs, a pitcher of iced tea. He heard someone coming and shut the refrigerator door in a hurry.

James went through the side door and out onto the deck. This side of the Bensons' house was the only part he couldn't see from his place. He smelled smoke. He looked over at a fire pit where short flames wavered and coals glowed orange. Something was hanging above the fire, and James tried to make sense of what it was. He couldn't quite wrap his head around it. He walked down the stairs of the deck and onto the grass; he got closer and saw the head, the feet. It was a whole pig on a spit. Incisions had been made in long cross-hatches all over the pig's body.

He heard the sound of the screen door opening and he turned around. Ray Benson walked out, holding two bottles of beer, one in each hand.

“Isn’t she something?” He asked James.

James stared back at him, his mouth slightly open.

“Saw you out here and figured I’d bring you something to drink,” Ray said, coming closer, walking down the wooden steps. James could hear him breathing heavily.

“Thank you, sir,” James said, taking the bottle from Ray’s hand.

Ray came to stand beside him. James brought the bottle to his lips and took a sip of the cold beer. James glanced at Ray, who was looking out at the pig. Ray’s eyes looked small and black; they gave off a cool, dark sheen, like metal. James breathed deeply. The air held an early-spring sharpness. He smelled pine needles and woodsmoke. The sun was low, coming through the woods, and it threw golden light all over the lawn, with stripes of shadow from the tree trunks.

“Here, you mind holding this for me?” Ray said, handing James his beer. “I gotta turn her over.”

James watched as Ray walked over to the pig. He took hold of the long, curved handle at one end of the pig and turned it carefully, slowly, until it was belly-up. James could not look away. The pig’s eyes were closed. Its face was blackened where heat had seared it, and the ears were thin and charred. James looked at the rod coming out of its mouth, and the front legs which were curled up to hide the sides of its face.

That night, James woke up while it was still dark. He felt as if he still might be dreaming. He walked through the house, down the narrow hallway, slipping through the dark, feeling the silken quality of the air on his shoulders. He traced his fingers along the wall so he could feel where he was going; he kept his hand low to avoid hitting any

hanging pictures. He felt an undercurrent, a quiet electrical hum at the back of his brain. James went out into the front lawn and walked to the treeline at the border of the neighbour's yard. Bats swooped low and circled the trees. James stared out at the Bensons' house. The blinds on the windows had all been closed. He could see that the lights had been turned out, and he pictured them in their bed. He felt the spring-thawed ground beneath his bare feet, cool and soft, muddy in some places. One of the bats flew and circled around him; he heard the leathery sound of its wings. He stood for a long time at the edge of the treeline, feeling his chest rise and fall. James looked down and saw strawberry blossoms which had come up during the night. They covered the ground in small, white, roundish blooms, glowing in the near dark.



# Don't Ever Let Me Go

Coralie Olivier

Once Thomas had left the children with his parents, he felt ready to tackle the state of the house. The kids had dumped their toys all over the living room but he could not bring himself to care. His priorities were the dining room and the kitchen.

Helen had made a mess during dinner, dropping bits of gooey pasta on the way to her mouth. Sam's high chair was painted with broccoli puree. In the kitchen, fake cheese was congealed at the bottom of a pot as Thomas had made boxed mac and cheese. He wasn't a great cook, and he hadn't had the mental fortitude to make anything else. He hadn't thought to order pizza until he was straining the pasta. He couldn't bring himself to care what his wife would think once she learned that he had fed their daughter powdered cheese.

Thomas started by cleaning the table. He had always been bad at multitasking. He worked better when he was given one task at a time. Lucy was good at figuring out where he was most useful in the house. Right now, he decided it was the table. Once he had scrubbed the goo off of the old wooden table—his parents had given them this rectangular, lacquered table as a wedding gift—he moved on to the dishes.

He turned on the water and waited until it was steaming hot to start washing. Every time the boiling water brushed his skin, it distracted him from his thoughts. He stopped wincing after the first few burns. That stupid cheese was holding on hard. He scratched harder and harder. The metal pot, heated by the water, became unbearable to hold. Still, Thomas would not stop until it was clean.

The pot slipped out of his grasp and clattered to the bottom of the sink. Thomas let out a curse between his clenched teeth. His eyes landed on the picture frame that rested on the window sill above the sink. It was Lucy and him, back in 1981, during their camping trip to Yosemite before Lucy's last year of college. Before their wedding.

Thomas grabbed the frame and threw it. It crashed onto the floor, bounced twice, and slid to a corner of the room, out of sight. He'd thought that the crash would siphon all the anger and sorrow out of him, but all it did was fuel his anger. He turned off the faucet and leaned against the sink. The last tendrils of warmth from the hot water lingered on his face.

A knock at the door pulled him out of his ruminations. He knew who it was since Lucy had called ahead. That was why he had left the children at his parents' for the night. He glanced at the clock on the wall. He hadn't expected her to arrive so soon, but then again, it was Lucy. She was always early.

Thomas brushed the last few drops of water off of his hands and threw the dishrag in a corner. He ignored the broken frame on the floor and traversed across the dark living room to the front door.

That afternoon, Thomas had come back from work to find his wife crying on the couch. Lucy was like him; she didn't cry often. To find her in such a state had worried him beyond measure. Lucy had not stopped crying when she spoke to him, but she had spoken without hesitation. She had told him that he deserved the truth, that he was her best friend, and she loved him, but he wasn't the only one. She was tired of lying to him. She had been having an affair with her childhood best friend, Debbie.

When Thomas opened the front door, Lucy was standing on the other side, hugging herself. The strangest mixture of emotion

passed over him. Relief that she was back. Worry to see her looking so anxious. Love, always. But also hurt, anger, and betrayal for what she had done to him. He thought about not letting her in, and slamming the door shut instead. But she looked at him with those brown eyes that he had always loved, and he knew guilt was eating away at her. Without a word, he stepped aside and let her in.

They moved like two lost souls on familiar grounds. Lucy removed her jacket and left her handbag where she always did. Then, she took off her shoes. Thomas stood with his hand on the door handle, watching her. Normally, they would be talking about their day. He would have leaned down to kiss her cheek. She would have been asking about the children. Now the only thing Thomas could hear was the hum of the lightbulb over the dining table.

Lucy took one look at the living room and, once she saw the mess that Thomas had not had the courage to clean up, she decided to move away from it too. Thomas followed her like a shadow. His initial surge of emotion had dissipated. Now he felt numb with anger, like the fire in his chest was burning his nerves until he couldn't feel anything at all.

Lucy sat down on one side of the table—her side, it had been hers for six years now—and she crossed her arms over the wood. After a moment, Thomas decided he should sit down too. He was barely in the chair when his legs started bouncing anxiously.

They stared at each other. Thomas saw his wife, his rock, the one constant steadiness he'd had since they were sixteen. Lucy never seemed to change. She always kept her chocolate brown hair the same shoulder-length, she still wore the same kind of polo shirts and blouses, and only applied a light touch of makeup. Right now, she looked worried, with her eyebrows furrowed the way Thomas knew. What did

she see when she looked at him, he wondered. His dirty blond hair was shorter than when they had started dating. He hadn't shaved in a few days. Did she still see that boy who struggled with math and had asked her for help? Or did she see some idiot so naïve and gullible that he was the perfect victim to trick?

"Are the kids in bed?" she asked, breaking the icy silence.

"I left them with my parents for the night. I told them I got us last minute theater tickets."

Lucy scoffed. She tried to contain the sound, but he knew her too well. She was scoffing because she thought it was a stupid excuse that his parents had not fallen for. Well, Thomas wouldn't have had to come up with an excuse if she hadn't cheated on him.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice broken with guilt. "I..."

"Can I start?" he cut her off.

Questions had been boiling in his mind since Lucy had left that afternoon—Thomas had told her he needed some time alone to think so she had taken her car keys and gone. Part of him needed to know all the details, the ins and outs. Part of him wished he would just shut all the questions down, take Lucy into his arms, turn a blind eye to it all and go back to the times before, when their marriage was perfect.

Lucy nodded. Thomas didn't know exactly where to start. His thoughts were swept around like hay in a storm. He grasped for the first question that he could.

"Are you a lesbian?"

Lucy pursed her lips. Even saying the word had made him feel dirty. Lucy couldn't be a lesbian, Thomas thought, she had been

valedictorian in high school. She'd kept a perfect grade point average throughout college. She could have gone on to law school, if Thomas hadn't proposed to her before that. Before Helen was born, she'd been a history teacher. She was uptight and serious. It wouldn't make any sense. Nonetheless, Lucy nodded.

"I guess I am."

Thomas felt something in his mind shatter, like a scalpel had sliced his brain in half. He couldn't believe it.

"How long have you known? Did you know before we got married?"

This time, Lucy shook her head.

"I promise you, if I had known back then, I would have told you, or I would have... All this pain could have been avoided if I'd known sooner."

"So when did you figure it out?"

"About two years ago... And even then, I was in denial for a long time afterward."

Thomas had not realized his teeth were digging into his tongue. He relaxed his jaw, and his tongue felt bruised. Two years ago was around the time Sam was conceived.

"I thought maybe you suspected it," Lucy confessed to him.

Thomas' confusion only grew.

"Why? How could I have suspected it?"

Lucy shrugged.

“I mean, you know, how we almost never... had sex.”

Thomas’s leg stilled under the table. He felt like an ice statue. He hated talking about this, or even thinking about this. It made him feel that there was something wrong in their marriage, when there really wasn’t. They loved each other, they almost never got into arguments, they were the best of friends. He loved her. Sex was just... well, it was a thing he wished they did more often, but he knew Lucy always felt uncomfortable, and he didn’t want to pressure her into it. They’d had two kids, and he didn’t need any more.

Fury, like a sudden volcanic explosion, scorched his lungs. Sex was destroying his perfect life.

“Is that all this was with Debbie? You just wanted sex?”

He wasn’t sure what answer he expected, nor which answer he wanted. He was fighting his instinct to jump away from the table so he wouldn’t have to hear an answer at all.

“It...” Lucy sighed. She was wringing her hands over the table, a surefire sign of her anxiety. “I thought it was a mistake, the first time it happened. We were at the cabin, and...”

Thomas shook his head.

“Spare me the details.”

Lucy and Debbie had taken to renting a small cabin near Lake Augustus on the weekends. He’d never thought much about it, only that he was happy that Lucy was getting some time away from the kids with her childhood friend. Now the thought made him grind his teeth.

“We were drunk and so I thought it was just a mistake. And I tried so hard not to think about it again, but I couldn’t. It’s like I told

you this afternoon. You're my best friend, the father of my children, and I love you. But I love Debbie too. I never understood that part of me, and so I could never give it to you. It was for her."

Lucy's words hurt like a hatchet to the chest. Thomas could feel his throat closing off. He heard it in his voice when he pushed his next question off his tongue:

"Couldn't you have just pretended? We were perfect."

"I tried, but now that I know, I can't go back. And I'm sorry, but even when we were at our best, we were never perfect."

Thomas couldn't hear another word of it. He stood up from the table and rushed to the kitchen before any sobs could escape his lips. He grabbed onto the sink with one hand and clenched his fist until his knuckles were white. Hot tears ran down his face as he did his best to contain his sobs. They all clustered together into a hiccup.

He heard Lucy moving, and he knew she would be coming over, but he was cowering in the corner of the kitchen, and there was nowhere else to hide. When Lucy entered the kitchen, he kept his back to her. He heard her faint footsteps stop on the tiled floor. She picked up the picture frame off the ground, and he heard her collect all the little pieces of glass. She set them aside on the counter, then spoke:

"I've been there. I tried to convince myself that we were perfect. We've always worked effortlessly, haven't we? But don't you want more?"

Thomas whirled around. He brushed the tears out of his eyes as he glared down at his wife.

"What more would I need?" he asked.

“I don’t know. Someone who could love all of you unconditionally? I never did, even though I tried as hard as I could. Don’t you think that you deserve that much?”

Thomas was shocked by the question. In his mind, there had only ever been Lucy. Ever since they started dating in high school, his father always told him that Lucy was the perfect girl, the kind you married and lived happily ever after with. It had never occurred to him that there could be someone else, someone better suited for him.

Slowly, Lucy closed in the distance between them. When she wrapped her arms around him, he flinched into her touch.

“I’m sorry,” she told him again.

That seemed like all Thomas needed to break down into her arms. He buried his face into her shoulder and took in the familiar scent of her. Her perfume and conditioner had been the same for years. This was the smell he most associated with home. Was there a future where someone else’s smell would become that home for him? The thought terrified him, and he clung to her even harder.

Lucy rubbed his back until he had stopped sobbing. As Thomas pulled away, he realized that he had never cried in her arms like that before.

“I’ll make us some tea, alright?” she offered.

Thomas nodded. While he moved away to give her space, he spotted the fragmented frame beside the toaster. The glass had broken on impact into a spider web. The wood of the frame was snapped where the glue once held it together. Thomas looked at it for a moment. He’d thought it was a good frame with sturdy nails, but it had



just been a cheap glued frame. The picture inside was still good though. He took it with him to the dining room table.

When Lucy joined him, she was carrying two mugs of chamomile tea. They were their mugs, his Snoopy mug and her bear paw mug. She set his drink in front of him. Instead of taking her seat across from him, she drew one of the side chairs and sat beside him. She leaned toward him to look at the picture in front of him.

“Things were so much easier back then,” she said wistfully.

Thomas frowned. He had thought those college years were the most difficult for them, especially after he’d quit and returned to their small hometown to work for the mayor’s office. He’d missed her constantly, even though they spoke on the phone every day. He’d always thought that everything had become easy once they got married. He never knew Lucy saw it the opposite way.

“Does she love you too? Debbie?”

He was less apprehensive of the answer. Somehow he felt like he knew it already. He just needed Lucy to confirm it for him. Lucy tried to hold back a smile.

“She told me she’s been in love with me for almost as long as you have been.”

Thomas expected more anger. Instead, he felt peaceful. He loved Lucy, still, and he wanted her to be happy. If Debbie could make her happy, then he was at peace.

“We still have a lot to talk about,” he told her.

Lucy nodded.

“Of course. This changes everything.”

He moved his warm hand away from the mug and placed it on her hand. She flipped her hand to take his in hers. She smiled at him, and he smiled back. He knew Lucy wasn't about to run away with Debbie and abandon him. He knew she cared too much for him and the kids. They would have to put it all down, all the rules and all the changes. Though it would take time for Thomas to forgive her, he knew he still wanted Lucy by his side. They were embarking on this new trip together. Thomas felt ready.

## Fledgling

Bridget Wadden

The moment the crow flies through my bedroom window, it forgets how it came in and does not know how to get out again. It crouches atop the doorway to the half-bath and shrinks into its body, looking at me in confusion. I wave at it and tell it to go. I motion to the open window by sticking my arm through it and flapping my hand like a wing. I take down the curtain rod and tap the wall beside him. He flaps his wings in panic and hops farther down the ledge. The sky is darkening outside. Seeing he's unconvinced of his ability to leave, I get so upset that I yell at the crow to "GET OUT! LEAVE ME ALONE! THE WINDOW IS RIGHT THERE LITERALLY IT IS RIGHT THERE AND IT'S OPEN! HOW DUMB ARE YOU HOW DUMB HOW DUMB HOW FUCKING STUPID CAN YOU GET YOU IDIOT BIRD?" I scream and hit the wall harder and sit on the bed and cry like this is the hardest thing I've ever had to do, and all he does is flap some more and look scared. He doesn't leave. I feel bad, then, and start apologising because he didn't deserve that, did he? He gives no response, and I look at him right in his blank bird stare, and all at once I feel so forgiven that it is as if I had not said a single word to begin with. When the sky is black and I feel heavy, there is nothing else to do but sleep with a pillow over my head.

The house is massive and it echoes when I walk. It was a snap decision to rent it for the winter, and I didn't check the location too closely so I didn't know I'd be plunged deep into farmland, alone save for the birds. The crow is staring at me and I at it. It didn't leave in the night, didn't attack when I woke. We are bathed in morning winter sunlight, disregarding the cold. When my phone dings, the crow cocks his head and I pretend not to hear anything. A second ding bristles his wings.

“It’s none of your business,” I tell him, and break out my trail mix to throw him some seeds, keeping the nuts for myself. He catches expertly, twisting and turning to account for my bad aim. A third ding, and he caws. I open my phone to the same messages I’ve gotten for a week, all from Greer. She asks me where I am. Tells me to come home. Says I have her sweater. I look down to see it hanging off my body the way she used to, the way a person who loves another person hangs onto their every limb as if it were the best limb ever made. I close my eyes and smell her in the knit, all warm and fleshy. When I start to see flashes of her face the way I saw it last, all twisted and awful with tears, I open my eyes and try not to blink. The crow is still staring at me, eyes wide and cutting. It ruffles its feathers with impatience. I throw another seed.

It is nearly lunchtime when the crow follows me into the kitchen and settles on the dining table. He is gentle with his claws against the hardwood, even when I take out a pan, a knife, a spatula, and clang them around without meaning to. This room feels most like the cottage quaintness I envisioned: plates on walls, dried flowers in bundles hanging from the ceiling.

Today I’ll use freeze-dried eggs, the last pantry ingredient. So far I’ve avoided omelettes; memories of breakfasts with Greer slip in through smells. I open the side door onto the garden, I turn the fan on high, I plug my nose. Nothing works.

The crow observes as I dump frozen onions and mushrooms into a pan, on low—Greer likes them soft. I whisk powder-eggs with water until they are like new. She cracks fresh ones into a bowl, getting the whites on her fingers. I sprinkle cheese, she folds the omelette in half. While I gather plates, she grabs us mugs. I turn on the kettle and she pours it when it’s hot.

It is not until I am sitting down in front of two plates, two mugs, two halves of a meal and a crow, that I realize I have counted wrong. I sink and breathe out every memory of Greer onto the eggs that are going cold. The crow watches without judgement. I am about to offer him a seat, a napkin, a demonstration of how to use a fork; but as I reach for it, he finally remembers where he came from and flies up around my head, and out the side door.

I watch the spot where he just was. I think of how interested he seemed in my dance without a partner: Greer's and my path from fridge to stove to cupboard (where I'm sure I kissed her behind the door), and how the crow did not care at all to see me eat what I had made. I think I am the same. I think I, too, would like to fly away before anything ends. Anything, anything ever.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Bridget Huh** is a queer Korean-Canadian poet from Toronto (Tkaronto). She is currently an MFA candidate in poetry at Cornell University, and she holds a BA from Concordia University. Her poetry and criticism have appeared in or are forthcoming from *The Walrus*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Margins*, *The Ex-Puritan*, *The Capilano Review*, and elsewhere. She is the winner of the 2023 Vallum Poetry Award, and her debut collection of poetry, *Fugue Body*, is forthcoming from Véhicule Press in March 2025.

**Tony Cooper** is a writer and creator from St. John's, NL, and current grad student at McGill University in Montreal. His creative pursuits muse on historical perspective, loss, mythmaking, and a marred reconciliation with indigeneity. When not writing, he can be found either sequestered in a library or throwing himself off a wrestling ring.

**Beth Fecteau** is a writer in the third year of her literature degree at Concordia. Her work has previously been published in *The Plant*. You will most often find her tucked away on one of the higher floors of the Hall Building, over-caffeinated and reading a horror novel.

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

Born in Scotland and living in Montreal, **Jack Forbes** studies English Literature and Creative Writing at Concordia and works part-time in a bar. These poems are inspired by the real-life strangeness of living, working and studying in Montreal.

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**Alex O'Neill** is a queer poet born and raised in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal. He has been previously published in McGill University's International Relations Review, Scrivener Creative Review, and The Encore Poetry Project. He is fond of obscure jazz records, craft beer, foreign policy, and shinrin yoku.

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diverse perspectives that emerge from working with other artists and writers.

**Taro Williams** (he/him) is a Canadian artist and writer raised in the east-end of Tkaronto/Toronto. His work has previously been published in *School Schmool* (2022, 2023), *Ex-Puritan* (2024) Moss Puppy Press (2024) *Your Impossible Voice* (2024), *The Hemlock Journal* (2024), *Squid Magazine* (2024,2025), and *Manic World Magazine* (2025).

**Jackson Dunnigan** is a Montreal-based artist, writer, and student at Concordia University. He writes in a paranoid, obsessive style ranging from political commentary to slapstick buffoonery.

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**Spencer Diver** is currently falling down an infinite staircase. He thinks he's a writer from Brantford, Ontario, but to be quite honest, he's taken quite a few blows to the head on his way down so he could be mistaken.

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**Coralie Olivier** was born and raised in Aix-en-Provence, France. After obtaining her master's Degree in Cultural Studies, specializing in gender and American horror, she came to Montreal to study Creative Writing at Concordia. With a special interest in fantasy, sci-fi, and horror, Coralie is a versatile writer who likes to mix and match genres. When she's not writing, Coralie is interested in history, cinema, video games, and crochet.

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