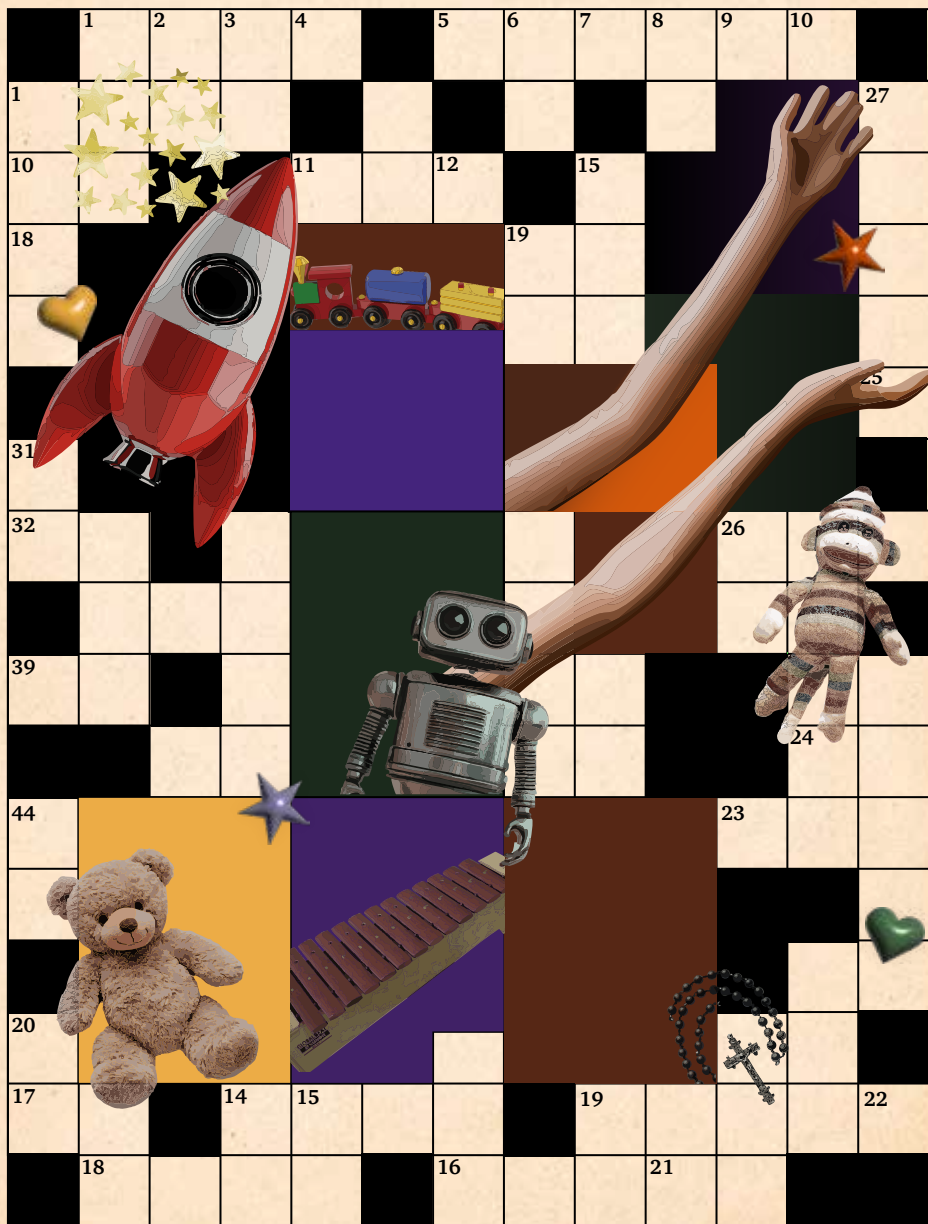


# SOLILOQUIES ANTHOLOGY 30.1



# 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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## EDITORIAL TEAM

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## FOREWORD

Creating the anthology you hold, the first issue of our thirtieth consecutive year, was intensive, laborious, and so *so* gratifying. We received well into the hundreds of incredible submissions from dedicated Canadian writers, particularly from members of our own Concordia University community. Over the course of weeks, our editors sifted through these pieces, and uncovered those which would best encapsulate what we feel represents *Soliloquies* 30. We could not be more proud of the results.

We particularly want to express the deepest gratitude towards our staff; they each are the reason this anthology can exist as it does in its physical, edited form. The masthead that we have gathered has been beyond what we could dream of, and we truly owe them everything for their dedication to this journal. Our skilled editors carefully considered and discussed each piece, worked closely with our contributors, and meticulously compiled the works you will imminently be reading. Our wonderful Managing Editor provided crucial administrative support, carefully organizing our submissions and our operations. Both our Social Media Manager and Graphic Designer are talented beyond articulation; they have created a digital and aesthetic presence for *Soliloquies* that we are unbelievably proud of. Finally, our incredible Web Content Writers, led by our Web Content Manager, have been tirelessly working to publish digital articles on a weekly basis. The journal in your hands reflects a team of especially talented individuals and their contributions.

*Micaela Day*

We owe perhaps our greatest thanks to the contributors who trusted us with their work, who let it be held, turned over, considered and changed. That generosity stayed with us. It was a privilege. And to those whose pieces do not appear in these pages, thank you still: for what was read and what lingered, and for shaping this community by offering your art to journals like ours.

In 30.1, time presses its thumb into the body, age answers the call, and change happens slowly by negotiation. These works look back at childhood, the in-between, and forward into bodies that have lived, bodies that remember. They move through family ties, they consider impulse and momentum, they ache of what almost was. Reckoning unfolds on these pages alongside summer fruit, airplane aisles, backyard barbecues, and other ordinary/extraordinary scenes that hold our lives.

Dear reader, thank you for your ongoing dedication to and interest in the MTL lit scene and beyond. We hope you fall—with love—for these pieces as deeply as we have. We are honoured to share them with you as we inaugurate the thirtieth year of *Soliloquies Anthology*.

*Foster Gareau*



# THE THUMB

Toby Walma

So I was standing at my chopping board when I started to notice my thumb.

It was on the side of my hand, lower than the others, with a bit of webbing attaching it to the rest of me. It moved in stubby little flexes and could only bend in one place compared to my other four fingers, which bent in two places.

My thumb was different from my other fingers for other reasons, too: it was much shorter, the nail rectangular rather than square, and the whole finger was wider. I'm not convinced it was a finger at all. Possibly, it was only considered a finger by technicality. I watched my thumb waggle. With my other hand, I picked up my kitchen knife. It was a nice expensive knife, and I even had it professionally sharpened not too long ago, which a lot of people don't think is worth the money, but it is. I aligned my index finger over the top of the blade, where it's dull but bites if you press hard, particularly if you've had it professionally sharpened not too long ago.

There wasn't anything wrong with my thumb until then, but I had never reckoned with how different it was. I don't think you can quite imagine how unsettling it is to look at four normal fingers and see a thumb, a little ways down, like a malformed nub, pivoting and jerking about, drinking blood from the same arteries that feed the other fingers. Even those three wrinkles on the joint

seemed like wide stitched mouths, nothing at all like the neat lines along the joints of my other fingers.

I spread my left hand loosely on the chopping board, feeling the old knife grooves on the green plastic nicely slot into the lines of my palm. Thinking it might hurt, I put my tea towel in my mouth.

Gnawing on my towel, I untangled a crucial misunderstanding about amputation. I had always expected it would hurt, being that you were cutting off a bit of yourself. But in that moment, it occurred to me that the damage would be done to my thumb, and once the thumb was no longer part of me, I'd be free of all that, no pain required.

Relieved, I placed the tip of the knife in the spot between my index finger and the thumb, then cleaved. The flesh separated easily, but the bone demanded that I press down with more force, all the way up to my shoulder. With a gratifying *thunk*, the knife bit plastic and I cleared the thumb away from my hand, now trimmed and showing only four fingers.

A hole opened on my hand where the thumb had come away, but luckily there was only blood coming out of it and I keep band-aids in my kitchen for this sort of thing. My cutting board was a little wet, so I gave it a rinse in the sink.

As I did, I took pleasure in the sight of my four fingers grasping the board, each so regular, slender, and equal. Rather, my first three fingers were regular, but the pinkie was a great deal shorter. It didn't even rise to the level of the third knuckle on my ring finger. This half-grown protrusion hung on the edge of my

hand without even a buffer to maintain its position. It looked as though it might be sheared off if I misjudged a corner.

I laid my hand on the chopping board again, spreading my fingers. The pinkie seemed to spread even further than the others, as if it were straining to escape me. I'd wasted all my time, even before I'd been alive, growing this monstrous little curd of flesh, and it wasn't even grateful. Years of hangnails and stubbed fingers had reaped a freeloader.

I took up my knife again, relieved by its easy heft, its warm plastic handle. I brought it over the pinkie, hovering the thickest section of the knife over the smallest digit, then severed decisively. Once more, the pain was all contained within the little one, and all I felt was admiration for my knife's clean cut. The pinkie rolled off the edge of the chopping board and across my counter, toward the compost bin. For once it was taking some responsibility for itself.

I rubbed my palm on the wet chopping board, making it slippery and shiny. How graceful those three fingers looked together, how neatly symmetrical. My index and ring finger framed the middle finger, making it even taller by comparison. So tall that it seemed to stretch across the chopping board, like a shadow cast by the setting sun. Longer, longer still, until it reached toward the other knives in the knife block. I shuddered. The middle finger should have been happy to see both the pinkie and thumb go. Its central position was still assured. There was a concern of what others might think, however. A raised middle finger is always disrespectful, so for the sake of my index and ring finger, I would have to let this one go too.

I lined up the cut. If only the middle finger would be content and live with its fellows peacefully, yet my other fingers could not tolerate its obscenity. I spread my index and ring fingers wider still, struggling to keep them out of the path of the knife. My other hand lifted the knife, then brought it down. The knife slipped in the mess I was making and nicked my ring finger, right at the base. The middle finger, at least, was disposed of. I placed it with the pinkie, which had begun to lose its pinkness.

I watched blood trickle from the cut in my ring finger. I lifted my hand, rotating it to let the droplet make the full circle. Looking at the ring of blood under the kitchen light, I was possessed with the fear that this knife-work was some kind of social commentary. I had no intention of creating a metaphor, only of cleaning up my hand, but as soon as the thought came in, it couldn't be deported.

The ring finger pulsed with symbolism, exerting its own gravity and drawing my knife to it. I brought my hand to my mouth, sucking the blood off my knuckle, and then lowered my hand to the chopping board. I raised the knife again. If I'd been so careless as to create a metaphor, then it had to be stopped before it spread. The ring finger snapped off almost jauntily, as if it had never been all that tightly affixed. We were glad to bid each other farewell, I could see.

I touched my index finger gently with the flat side of my knife, running my cold metal across the skin. I felt its warmth seep into my knife, and I smiled at the comfort.

## LAST WORDS

Louise Carson

We are at the unveiling and I have  
all of you to thank. The house cost me – eight years  
without a mouth but the ghosts  
are happy. Their faces repeat in the flooring,  
old linoleum cracked by their shining up  
from the basement.

Every few minutes  
my daughter goes out to check the super-moon's  
progress. She texts her Saturday night. In  
the country kids can't meet unless parents  
drive them. We have our own problems. Pushing  
got me to here.

The moon shines in our eyes  
till we move the bed – he and I – further  
away from the glow through the window.

In the morning

the outside light will be on. Alone,  
I switch it off.

# STATION TO STATION

Ryan Di Francesco

I wondered what he looked like now.

It had been a few years  
since I last saw my dad  
before he went to prison.

We wrote.  
That was it.

Half-cloaked lines.

I thought about what I'd say  
when I saw him  
as I stared at the backs of necks while  
the Toronto bus to St. Catharines  
rattled along the QEW.

It was a long two hours.

Past Mississauga, Oakville,  
up and over the Burlington bridge  
where Hamilton's steel factories  
smudge the sky  
with their working lungs—

leading into Niagara,  
eventually pulling off

onto my childhood streets,  
arriving at the station.

I saw him standing there  
through the dusty windows.

Like a stranger.

His hair white now.  
Lines carved like jagged bars  
around his mouth.

Those same eyes  
staring at me  
after all the time they'd served.

I knew it was hell.

Getting his teeth broken.  
Wrists snapped.  
Pushing through it.

Making crosses

knotted from threads of sheets,  
just to keep his hands busy.

The bus stopped.

People rose,  
pushed forward,  
breathing heavily,  
coughing.

I waited until everyone was off  
then stood,  
moved  
slowly  
down the aisle,  
hesitated at the door,  
then stepped out—

to him,  
waiting on the platform.

I walked over,  
still wondering what  
to say.

Then, “Hey—”  
“You hungry?”

## BOBBING

Corvus Campbell

Visions in still water again, this time  
pressing against mattress scent  
weighing heavy-handed on a head of hair  
held down, I think,  
I am an apple at the bottom of the basin,  
your teeth sharp against wet skin,  
split open at the core until I see the surface clearly  
I am lying and still  
holding prone this bedfast body.

## WHERE ARE TYLER'S POKÉMON CARDS?

Joe Davies

Are they in the hole in the wall where he keeps his stash? Are they next to his crack pipe or the empty 9mm shell casings he picked up in the stairwell outside the food bank? He's not sure. Ask him and see. He ought to remember them well, like it was yesterday: the shiny new packages they came in, the stiff card edges, the smell and excitement of going through them one by one, having the money in his pocket and pulling it out, spreading it on the counter, and saying in his best voice, "Two packs of Pokemon cards, please"—the feel of them in his hand before they were opened, the thrill of not knowing what was inside.

Where are they now, those Pokémon cards? Where does he keep them? Are they spread across the floor of his room at the flop-house? Strewn beneath his unwashed clothes? Did he leave them at home when he made his escape? When he left that place where all he heard was nag, nag, nag? Or did he slip them in his pocket at the last minute—an old habit, an old practice—the boy inside somehow still remembering what was what? Because he could have. And they could be anywhere, those Pokémon cards.

They could be in the derelict kitchen with its pile of unwashed dishes, its unswept floor, its shelves empty except for the package of Quaker Oats no one knows what to do with, the kitchen with its cracked window propped open with an empty beer

bottle, the back door unlockable, leading out to a bare scrub yard where the neighbourhood dogs all come to foul in peace.

But if they are in the kitchen, those Pokémon cards, where, oh where would they be? In the cutlery drawer? Under the table? In the refrigerator that only runs warm? Would they be in the sink with its stack of grey bowls and even greyer plates, soaking in brackish water, hiding broken glasses and a couple of hypodermic syringes? They could be, those Pokémon cards. They could be just about anywhere.

Ask Tyler. See what he says.

Now, where could he look? In the room with the broken TV and the empty shelves? The one with the curtains drawn and the sunken couches? Perhaps they are under the cushions. They've slipped 'tween the cracks and are hiding with the old remote and the loose change and the one empty condom wrapper some odd sod thought to open. Or check the coffee table. Look under the bottles and ashtrays and empty chip bags. Perhaps hidden in that stack of unopened bills and last notices? No? Now, where do you think they might be, those dear old things, those can't-live-without'ems, those Pokémon cards?

The basement? The attic? The crawlspace 'neath the sloping front porch?

Further afield?

The methadone clinic? The in-tray of some soon-to-retire, grumbly old social worker? The drawer of a police officer's desk—the one who frisked him and clapped him—but, please, only lightly—'bout the both of his ears?

Perhaps we could ask Tyler if he thought there's a chance they'd be in the ditch where he passed out after the affair at Aleisha O'Leigh's—that time they were all so baked he walked home the wrong way—that ditch—the one by the mothballed factory, where the dirt is all black and no one knows why—that factory.

Because, of course, it'd be good to know where on this bountiful earth they are, those Pokémon cards.

Have they progressed to the landfill? Say it's not so. Have they passed through some incinerator? Have they been burnt—and so, now gone—their tiny bits released to the heavens above, where they can now help keep us warm? Until we find them, who can say? Who can say where they are, those Pokémon cards?

Until discovered, they could be anywhere, couldn't they?

They could be at the stock exchange. At the university, attending a class on world literature. The bus station, perhaps. Maybe they've been used to stuff the shoes of the mayor. No? One of the councillors? A veterinary surgeon with a light touch and a passion for frisbee golf? Some minor league hockey coach might have them. A cashier? A foreign diplomat? Or, so might a bum. A good old-fashioned bum. They might be stuffed in a plastic bag he takes everywhere with him, or better yet, tied up in a polka-dot cloth that swings at the end of a very long pole. How about that?

Well, wherever they turn out to be, these Pokémon cards, one thing's for sure: this Tyler hasn't been much help finding them, has he? No, he certainly hasn't. Wherever those Pokémon cards are, wherever they might be, Tyler's been no help, not at all.

Look, there he is, sprawled on the floor of some squat—passed out cold—wasted—trashed—having just done a B&E and unloaded the goods in a hurry for a handful of bills, exchanged just as quickly—transmuted, so it was—into some god-awful thing that he took in a whirl and slid off his shelf—a place he can never escape fast enough—yes, it’s true.

So here’s the pickle, and there’s the beef, because wherever those cards are, we’ve no one to ask. True, we could wait ’round for him to stir, for Tyler-the-fallen to rise once again, but would he have any answer? Could he tell you a thing? Could he find the way home and show the place where those cherished cards hide?

Hmm?

He could be frisked right here on the floor. Gone over. No one would know. Because perhaps they are, after all, somewhere on his person, somewhere close to his heart. We could invoke the powers of Pikachu, of Squirtle, and of Raichu. We could ask Charmander and Darkrai, tell them we need help, and see what happens.

And what would they show us? Where would they point?

His back pocket? Of course! See the slim wallet! See what’s inside! There are no credit cards, no library card, no ID of any sort, really, and no cash at all. In the billfold, there are scraps of paper from another life, receipts from when he went places and bought things, the printing now smudged and blurred and faded, and the descriptions of the things he shelled out for all gone. But there is one thing in here—one clue—the thread that may lead to the place

where the Pokémon live, where those cards are held tight and still breathe—never mind how faintly.

Slipped into a recess, a slit in the leather, here's a picture, a photo of a young boy who at first could be Tyler but is different enough to suggest he is not. Tyler's younger brother. That's who it is. Five years his junior.

Off we go to his room, a room in Tyler's old home, the place he grew up, the place he escaped.

See the shoebox on the table next to the broken-down bed? See the lid? See the big, sloppy letters spelling out "Tyler's Pokemon Cardz"?

Should we believe what it says?

Do we make sure they're inside?

We might as well look.

Let's take a peek.

After all, we should probably know, shouldn't we?

So... careful.

Close your eyes.

Lift the lid and put it aside.

Now open them, open your eyes.

What do you see?

Well? What is it?

Yes! There they are! Under the lighter and the half-empty pack of Matinee—there they are!

Tyler's Pokemon cards!

Well done! Well done! Well done all around.

We've found them. We've found them: Tyler's Pokémon cards.

## THE OCEAN'S CONSTELLATION

Sophie Dufresne

We painted my bedroom ceiling purple  
when we bought the first batch of stars  
from the museum's gift shop.

I wanted to become an astronaut  
since the first night we went camping,  
so I insisted we go to the planetarium every weekend.

The stars became a reminder of my first abandoned dream.

When my childhood bedroom became the guest room  
(because you thought I had outgrown the stars),  
your cousin counted every glowing piece of plastic,  
mistaking them for sheep.  
*120 stars in this universe*, he mumbled before falling asleep.

When we moved to Montreal, we donated my stars,  
hoping they'd brighten someone else's world.

I bet my universe of second-hand wishes  
is somewhere in the ocean now—  
no longer shining,  
but sinking into unknown depths;  
exploring a new cosmos.

## SOUR CREAM SUMMER EVENING

Ryan Di Francesco

It was 1988.

I was at a backyard summer party  
with all the beer-drinking  
fenced in.

Paper plates sprawled  
across a picnic table.

Ketchup. Mustard. Relish.

All the parents  
hanging like sheets in windows.

Drunk.

I didn't think anything of it  
when I dumped  
half a bag of sour cream and onion chips  
onto my lap  
because I didn't want to share.

But one kid came up  
and pushed me.

My mom's boyfriend grabbed him  
by the arm  
and flung him into the grass.

Then he called me a little pussy.

And that's when hell lit up—  
like glowing tips of Du Mauriers  
between fingers  
as his old man crossed the lawn  
and threw a punch  
that landed like a split-finger fastball  
in the dirt—  
they tumbled hard,  
flailing  
into patio chairs.

I looked down  
and saw ants crawling over the chips  
and a half-eaten hamburger,  
next to dandelions,  
near the thin-soled shoes of laid-off GM workers  
scurrying around

as Don Henley's "The Boys of Summer"  
played through backdoor speakers

and the women screamed—

breaking it up to the lyrics:

“Out on the road today, I saw a DEADHEAD  
sticker on a Cadillac. A little voice inside my head said,  
“Don’t look back. You can never look back.”

The kid kept crying, holding his arm.  
I knew I should ask if he was okay.

But I didn’t.

Instead, I watched my mom’s boyfriend  
grab a beer from the cooler.

Then he looked at me,  
shot a half-grin,  
swaying his hips  
to that song.

I noticed an ant crawling  
on a chip.

I thought about  
stepping on it.

## THE MAKER'S WEB

Sabrina Roberts

Hellboys and acrobats  
treading tightrope,  
suspended high above  
the alleyways of the city.

Summoned by an unseen ringmaster,  
street cats let out guttural noises  
in response to these gymnastic bird-men,  
taunting all land mammals  
with their unnatural balance  
and lightness of foot.

The moon is their light,  
casting elongated shadows  
that dance like phantom puppets  
stitched to red brick.

Quickly they bound from laundry lines  
knocking over cords arranged like snares,  
leaving clothespins scattered  
on black cement.

Clowns make their move, too.  
A litany of face-painted figures

gather in ill-kept parks,  
jesters convening  
to plan their ultimate blow.

Perhaps a whipped-cream pie  
will be found in the morning,  
splattered against  
the symmetrical features  
of Broadway's newest billboard.

If it was time to meet your maker,  
you might find that he carries  
a top hat and cane,  
his long legs weaving  
through our man-made urban web:  
a spider forever evading  
the drop of a shoe:  
pulling strings with the ease  
of someone who has never feared a fall.

Learn to dance in equal measure,  
for the maker keeps the time—  
and those who falter  
are often left behind

## SPACE IS A VACUUM

Silas James

Sienna Faith was going to fucking space.

No, correction—Sienna Faith was going to stage the greatest comeback in pop history from Earth's orbit.

This wasn't a PR stunt. This was *art*.

It was history.

It was what icons did.

She'd always been a trailblazer. Everyone knew that. Twelve years ago, she was *it*. "Interstellar Love" had the world by the throat. Her smile was on billboards, her ass in neon latex was on cereal boxes, and her voice—autotuned to high hell—was sacred scripture in every shopping mall on the planet. It was all cotton-candy hooks and bubble-pop beats that wrapped around your spinal cord like glittery vines. She had thirteen Grammy nominations and an STD named after her in France. Her tours did Marvel movie numbers. She once blew a backup dancer on a jet ski in Bora Bora and still made it to Good Morning America by 7am.

She *was* the 2010s.

Then people got... confused. Lost. Temporarily blinded by youth and bad taste. All three of her follow-up albums flopped—but that wasn't her fault. They were just ahead of their time. Bloggers, YouTubers and hipster music review sites called them "corpse music assembled by an exec committee." and "shallow even for

electro-pop. But those people probably still used Androids and drank oat milk, so who the fuck cared?

Her fans got jobs, mortgages, babies. They moved on. The label quietly reassigned her stylists to the new girls—KayLynn X, Bella Virus, V!olet Sk!n—carbon copies of *her*, with bigger lips, no pores, and no shame.

She had glow-in-the-dark bodysuits before any of these new girls were even menstruating. She invented slutty alien chic. Her 2012 VMA performance with the levitating orb and the hatching egg? Revolutionary. Gaga wished.

But now, at forty, people acted like she was a relic. A dead meme. She'd post a TikTok and get comments like “is this AI?” or “my mom used to stan u lol” or “feet pics?”

She wore a sequined bodysuit to a red carpet last year and one of the label's execs took her aside and said, “Maybe we think about covering up next time, yeah? Nobody wants to see all that.” She refused to believe it. All of it.

Because deep down—past the Botox and the psychedelic microdoses and the laminated vision boards—Sienna Faith believed, no, *knew*, she was important. Not just a pop star, but a cultural monument. Like Elvis, but with way better skin and way less sweat.

Through all this, the label had tossed her one final bone: Space.

NASA partnership. Hype tie-in. Go to orbit. Record a new single in zero gravity. Play up the connection to her alien-themed song—“Interstellar Love,” that old fan favourite from back when her nose was still real and her eyes weren’t dead inside. It was poetic. Celestial. Biblical. She said yes immediately. They didn’t even get to finish the sentence.

“Nova Femme”—her first record in five years—would explode across the cosmos. She’d rise again, like a phoenix in thigh-high boots. In her mind, the headlines were already written:

THE STAR RETURNS FROM THE STARS

SIENNA FAITH: REBORN IN ORBIT

SHE WENT TO SPACE. NOW SHE’S GOING PLATINUM.

And the public—those fickle, confused, cruel little cockroaches—would finally see her again. Truly see her for the visionary she was. The queen. The goddamn legend.

But space was different than she’d imagined.

It was cold. Brutal. Quiet.

The shuttle was a sterilized tomb. Everything smelled like plastic and piss; every surface vibrated with this faint, sick little buzz that crawled under her skin. The crew barely looked at her. They called her “Civilian Payload #7.” Someone asked if she was the woman who used to date that guy from The Chainsmokers. Another thought she was a Real Housewife. No one here knew who she was. Worse—they didn’t care. About her music or about her. They just strapped her in, told her to sit still, and ignored her for three straight days while they worked.

On day four, the shuttle passed something it shouldn’t have.

They never figured out what it was. A flicker through the observation window. A wrongness. Like a shimmer inside the black. It pulsed. Moved.

And then it spoke—not in words, but through feeling. Like static in her spine. Like electricity in her marrow.

It entered her.

It slid in through the eyes, or the ears, or maybe the ego. Whatever was weakest.

An intelligence. A parasite. Ancient, endless, unnameable. Born from collapsed stars and planetary annihilations. It had been drifting across the galaxy, looking for a vessel. A voice.

And it chose her. It liked her.

She was radiant. She was magnetic. She was perfect.

In its mind, she was still beloved. Still feared. Still worshipped. Her image—scanned from satellite signals, old broadcasts and crumbling TikToks—was all sequins and spectacle. She was the Earth's high priestess of sound.

Sienna felt it inside her. It wrapped around her brainstem like ivy, pulsing with old starlight. She screamed for hours. Bled from her ears. Laughed until she puked. The crew chalked it up to G-forces and “space sickness”, logged a note on a tablet, and shut the hatch. It called itself Xel'vurn. Or maybe it didn't. Maybe her brain just gave it a name because human minds rupture when confronted with infinity. It showed her images—cities bowing before her. Earthlings chanting. Her voice, laced with code, shaping minds. They would write the track together. A signal disguised as a song.

“Transmit.”

Synth-heavy, seductive, soaked in ultra-frequencies and laced with commands. Listeners wouldn't even know they were being primed for surrender.

Sienna couldn't believe her luck.

“See?” she whispered, teeth slick with blood. “I am the chosen one.”

When she landed, she pulled her last few remaining favours to snag a livestream press conference.

CNN gave her ten minutes. It aired at 3AM. Only a hundred and forty people watched. The segment was textbook, she'd been media trained within an inch of her life. Except for one moment—a blip fringe conspiracists would later pick apart—when she leaned into the camera and said, clear and slow, “All receivers are online. Stay open. Do not resist the signal,” then giggled and called it “a little in-character teaser” for the album.

Despite the lukewarm reception, she released “Transmit” anyway, with *stunning* alien-coded visuals. She was naked except for chrome heels, mouth open in a scream that never ended, nipples broadcasting encrypted waves. A body remixed by something ancient. The captions read “THE FUTURE IS FEMALE (AND INTERGALACTIC).”

The video got flagged for violating community guidelines. Taken down in under a day. It only reappeared on fringe websites and conspiracy forums, shared by UFO truthers and EDM nihilists.

Reddit threads speculated she was dead. Or a clone. Or a government psyop. Spotify took the song off playlists after two weeks. They had gotten too many complaints about headaches and nausea.

But Sienna didn't care.

She could feel Xel'vurn burning inside her. Growing desperate.

Panicked. It started to realize, no one was listening. No minds were changing. No frequencies embedding.

Earth didn't want a pop prophet.

Earth didn't want her.

Still, Sienna believed that the comeback was underway. That the silence meant people were scared. Or in awe. Or secretly obsessed.

She did interviews on niche podcasts with under a hundred subscribers. She performed "Transmit" in a shopping mall in Reno for a crowd of fourteen. Her voice cracked. Her face glistened. Her eyes, wrong.

A child started crying. Someone threw a slushie.

The alien shrieked inside her skull. It tried to eject. But it was stuck. She wasn't just a vessel—she was a void.

Empty. Rotten.

There was nothing to jump to. No one watching. No signal strong enough to carry it.

She laughed. She cried. She kept going.

One day, she stood on a rooftop in L.A., streaming live on Instagram to thirty-two viewers. This time, she wore a shimmering veil and nothing else.

“I am the light,” she said. “I am the sound. I am the frequency.” Then she sang “Echo Void”, an unreleased track Xel’vurn had written through her, a lullaby for planetary extinction. The viewer count ticked down in the corner—thirty-two, twenty-seven, nineteen.

Halfway through the bridge, her phone lit up with a call from the label’s head of digital. She swiped to answer, holding the phone away from her face. A clipped, furious voice spilled out, scolding her for bypassing the social media team again, calling the rooftop stunt “the last straw.” She was being dropped—effective immediately, mid-broadcast.

She kept singing, veil trembling. It was all part of the performance. Inside her chest, something folded in on itself; inside her skull, Xel’vurn howled. The viewer count slid to seven, then three, then zero.

As she finished the final note, her body began to shimmer. Cells unraveling. Skin becoming data.

She smiled into the darkness, waiting for the world to bow.

But nothing happened.

The feed cut off.

The rooftop stayed empty for hours.

Sienna Faith was never seen again.

Three days later, TMZ ran a headline:

“Pop Star Missing After Bizarre Livestream. Fans Concerned (Kinda).”

Underneath: a photo of her, half-pixelated, mid-scream. The comments joked about AI filters and midlife crises. The label issued a vague statement about “mental health and privacy.”

No one played the song.

No one decoded the message.

No one noticed the stars above Earth dimmed slightly.

And somewhere, in some collapsed galaxy, Xel’vurn screamed through the void.

## PICKY

Megan Au

Pimples weren't the only thing she picked at.  
She picked nickels off the sidewalk  
because her mother told her they were lucky.  
She picked up her phone too often  
and didn't pick up enough books.  
She picked oat milk over whole milk  
because she liked herself enough not to pick  
another Saturday morning on the toilet.  
She picked the burgundy box dye  
because she saw a blonde girl use the same online.  
She should have used bleach,  
because her black hair never picked up the shade.  
She picked notes app poetry,  
though she preferred the charm of picking up a green glitter pen.  
She picked the humanities, knowing  
that she wouldn't be getting picked for a high-salary job.  
She picked the wrong guys, which she made up  
for by picking the right friends who laughed  
when she picked on them.  
She tried to pick up her mom's calls,  
but she could never pick a time  
to slow down and exhale.  
Sometimes, she picked a good guy.  
Most of the time, she would turn around

and admit she didn't know enough about him.  
She could never pick out the right questions  
when they made small talk, let alone spell his name.  
She had picked out her therapist,  
but she never had it in her to pick a day.  
She tried to stop picking herself  
apart in the mirror. She figured if she picked  
a horribly hot shower, the steam would hide  
her reflection in the glass. She still couldn't resist picking off  
her eyelashes or the hair on her upper lip.  
All she wanted to pick up was a vodka cran.  
Instead, she picked another night of scrolling  
through celebrity gossip and girls  
that she wished she were.  
She never picked herself– not really.

## WE ARE A PLACE

Yael T. Uribe

called to ask about the seedless  
watermelon we bought in the store  
by your apartment during last  
year's night gown season. it was  
one of those days that feel like they  
don't belong to us, and you found  
yourself consumed by disease.  
from time to time i still see you in  
places—in cigarette smoke, scarlet  
high heels, that saint-like stare in  
strangers' eyes, surgical tools, or a  
missing suitcase in the middle of  
the highway. we didn't start with  
sleepless slumber parties, public  
declarations of our craving for each  
other. we didn't become in the  
space between you and the last  
time we shared 'am i pretty's?'.  
long gone recklessness, and daily  
promises over necklaces, anecdotes  
of how we used to be so golden,  
fresh valedictorian promises. We  
started on a  
friend-less monday in the middle

of the road—fear of God and a church on the west side of town. you used to call me *silversong*, *my softest sigh*, your *silent one*. it leaves me feeling seasick that your lust was so delightful to watch. the silence in your house always so tempting—to lie to you, to clean the dust left behind, to leave you untouched and unnude in a place we are together. called tonight to ask you to open wide and spread out; our mouths full of smoke and daylight, then dripping sweet seedless watermelon juice; from our lips to our breasts. there is a place we are together. i don't say this in a 'best friend', 'kindred spirit' kind of assumption, but more like 'call me the next time you feel alive' kind of mutual comfort.

## *A RELUCTANT ODE*

Sage Milnthorp

But if I weren't writing about you,  
Montreal,  
I'd be writing about what I know  
Endless stretches of beige shingled suburbia,  
Trees drooping inward,  
The tips of their branches grazing the street  
The sink keeps gathering dust,  
The windows never get clean  
and a warm yellow light  
still glowing  
from the living room.  
the daily commute  
on a highway that never ends,  
That only ever makes way for a cul-de-sac,  
like the gentle hug of a slingshot  
that sends you flying backwards,  
to where you've always been,  
one day looking at yourself in the rearview mirror,  
eyes framed with crows feet  
it wasn't a choice to stay  
You just never decided to leave.

So instead,  
to the meeting of birds between the crosswalks

wings that flutter like the strings on a buskers guitar  
I've got nothing special to say about the thump of my feet on the  
pavement,  
but I do love your fire escapes,  
and your endless night,  
your shy hedonism,  
a cabaret show hidden in a church corridor,  
a mickey of warm liquor tucked in the sleeve of my coat  
there isn't a shortage of pleasure if one is brave enough to look,  
for those wishing to disappear  
and those sitting on a street curb,  
letting cigarette smoke billow into the open air.,

There's something for you here,

in a city  
so cold, humid and ridden  
with possibility.

You can try to resist the lady  
with red lips and blue hair,  
a casual tone and a piercing glare,  
But you'll end up whispering all your secrets to her  
across sheets,

streets

pillowed with snow.

your feet will get used to the long walks,

the feeling of your heart floating  
on cobblestone paths  
as irregular as the sky.  
where life shines  
through the joints in the stone brick buildings,  
backstreets like a jazz ensemble,  
all tangled and infatuated with itself,  
this alley was made to play  
with its exposed pipes, cracked flower pots,  
faded graffiti and tangled caution tape,  
and some drunk idiot,  
hollering off their balcony  
staircases that drum out an irregular beat  
porches that crumble like a cascading melody  
ragged and smooth,  
jagged and worn,  
a lazy hand hung over the steel-barred veranda,  
spilling cheap red wine like  
the fallen leaves of the maple tree,  
littered all on the ground,  
trampled in the rush of the 6 'o clock traffic.  
everything is wet with the dew of an early winter,  
dusted with frosted lace  
shining like the steel rungs on a spiral staircase,  
still dripping from the freezing rain.  
by dawn,

a distant melody rings out  
in the rusted dissonance,  
from somewhere beyond the flickering streetlight  
where people sleep in the streets,  
the cracks in a city where  
nothing breaks clean,  
sleepy party-goers march in a grandiose parade  
expensive coat pockets  
void of spare change  
with shining shoes and a sparkling disposition  
feathered and delicate  
a perfect charade  
reaching their arms up to the sky  
calling out like birds  
and avoid being pulled down,  
by those lying on the ground  
of this scrappy promenade.

what a tangled mess,  
of pleasure and pain  
which from the view atop the hills,  
only looks like the shining silver stakes  
which everything  
the living, rotting, breathing and singing,  
must grow around.

## CABIN FEVER

Hayley Bleho

Whoever said “try not to scratch it” never had itchy little fluid-filled bumps on their fingers. Itchy, bumpy little clusters of eczema, the kind mom never warned you about because the gene pool is somehow getting worse with each passing generation and this torture didn’t exist when she was coming up—and if it *bad*, it couldn’t be cured simply by using the goat’s milk soap *her* mom used on her. I wonder if dad ever had skin problems. Maybe he’s the contaminant. Or maybe it’s one of those recessive gene things and they both just happened to carry it.

But knowing won’t relieve my itch.

“Chicken or fish?” asks the flight attendant, leaning towards my middle seat.

“Does the chicken come with crackers?”

“Saltines are provided with both of—”

“I’ll take the chicken then please.”

What the “don’t scratch” crowd doesn’t realize is that there are so many things you can scratch with besides your fingernails. Jeans. A fork. An exposed brick wall at the blustery wind tunnel of a loft where your friend’s terrible band plays. Sometimes it’s the thing you’d least expect. Quality toilet paper is soft and gentle but the cheap brands that feel rough on your behind can be delightfully abrasive against a stubborn outbreak of blisters. Those

metal poles you cling to on packed bus rides are too smooth, but the upholstery works like a charm. It's also more discreet.

But good scratch posts are hard to come by when you're thirty-five thousand feet above sea level. And discretion isn't always an option.

"Chicken with crackers."

"Yes. Thank you."

I tear open the packet and immediately set to working the cracker up and down along my broken skin. Wait—no salt? What kind of saltine doesn't have salt on it? I was counting on those itty-bitty pieces of sea salt to scrape against the bumps.

"Seen any good movies lately?"

Fuck. I thought she finally drifted off. I turn to the matronly woman in the window seat.

"Yeah, some. They're kinda dark though."

"Oh, I like all kinds. Have you seen any of these?" She points to the in-flight entertainment options on the screen before her, scrolling through them as I gape at her persistence. My hands are on fire. Can't she see I'm busy?

"One or two. I hear *Drive My Car* is good, might be kinda slow though."

"But which have you *seen*?"

Jesus Christ, give me a break.

"*Hereditary*."

"Yeah? It's good?"

I nod.

"It's a family movie?"

“In a way.”

She taps on the film poster and sits back, adjusting her headphones.

What I wouldn't give to be in the aisle seat. Unfortunately, it's occupied by some kid whose girlfriend got bumped up to first-class, which I know because he hasn't stopped moaning about it since the moment we boarded. “She could've said no, right? Like, what can they do?”

I let an arm fall in mild frustration and splash some sauce on the fold-down tray.

“Shit.” Luckily, a flight attendant passes by at that very moment.

“Would you like a napkin, ma'am?”

Gross. I hate being ma'am'ed. “Yes, please.”

Then an idea crosses my mind.

“Can you make that two or three, actually?”

“Your attention, please. We will be beginning our descent shortly. We ask that you please return to your seats at this time and make sure that your belongings are safely stowed in the overhead lockers or under the seat in front of you. In the event of an emergency, leave all hand baggage behind. Thank you. *Votre attention, s'il vous plaît...*”

No problem there, I never left my seat. Couldn't risk waking my affable neighbour who, after switching out *Hereditary* for some flick about a plucky Labrador, has taken to sleeping in

that slow-droop-forward kind of way, her head jerking upwards with each service cart that rattles past. Honk shoo, honk shoo.

I catch myself rubbing my fingers against the ridges of the skull-shaped souvenir shot glass I picked up for Tristan. I should've packed it with my checked luggage, or at least left it where it was in my seat pouch, safely tucked away in its unmarked brown paper bag. But here it is, in my hands. My flaky, scaly hands.

To be clear, this was an airport souvenir shop purchase. As in, a five-minutes-before-I- boarded purchase. Was it an afterthought? Well, that's not how I would've put it, but in a way, yeah. Of course it was. I mean, who goes away and spends the whole time thinking about her boyfriend? I was busy. Busy soaking up the sun on sandy beaches, dancing under the stars in sundresses I only get to wear for a few short weeks back home, getting too drunk on strawberry daiquiris and—

*Busy with him, my conscience shouts.*

Let's not go there.

*What are you gonna tell Tristan? You are going to tell him, aren't you?*

If you'll excuse me, I have to stow my belongings now.

I lean forward ever so slightly, trying to reach the seat pocket without disturbing my sleeping cinephile. Impossible. I tuck the shot glass between my thighs and return to my napkins. Across the aisle, a middle-aged businessman is arguing with a petite brunette flight attendant.

"I'm going to keep it in my lap. I won't open it," he barks.

“I can’t allow you to do that, sir, it’s against regulations. Please put away your device.”

“You know what I think? You can take your fucking bullshit regulations and shove ’em.”

“Sir, please lower your voice...”

Don’t yell. Please God don’t start yelling. I’ve spent five hours squeezed between Tweedledee and Tweedledum with the flare-up of all flare-ups flaring up and if I can just make it through this I can run my hands under boiling water and it’ll be fine but please don’t yell.

“I am *not* yelling. You want to hear me yell?”

I’m not sure if this businessman has psychic powers or if he’s responding to something the flight attendant said, but I don’t want to find out. Gotta calm down, focus on something soothing. Crystal-clear waters. Summer strolls along the main drag, birds singing. Lazy mornings, spread out like a starfish in a mess of sheets. Curled up in Tristan’s arms.

*You sure you wouldn’t prefer Eliás?*

I don’t want to talk about this.

*We’re going to have to talk about it at some point.*

You’re not being fair.

*What’s fair? Was it fair when you went and—*

Okay okay, so what then, I’m a monster now? Is that right? Three years of good behaviour, of thoughtful gestures and sacrifices and then one bad night and suddenly none of that matters?

*One bad night? Wow, you really know how to spin—*

What about all the things he did, huh? What about all those comments he made even after I asked him, *begged* him to stop because they're not funny, not to me at least, so why can't he respect that? Or the fact that he missed my showcase and wasn't even sorry, or the way he talks to Sandra like I'm not even there.

"Excuse me."

So all that's fine, right? But one moment of weakness and now I'm the villain?

"Are you okay? Do you—"

"WHAT!?"

"I'm sorry, I just... Your hand is bleeding," says the lady sitting next to me in a low voice.

I look down at the mess of crimson red napkin scraps in my hands. "Oh."

"I'll call someone." She hits an overhead button and a flight attendant comes over.

"Yes?"

"Some more napkins for this one, please. Or maybe even a small towel."

"Right away," the flight attendant says, and he's off.

I turn to face the woman in the window seat. "Thank you."

"Of course." She stows her headphones and leans back in her seat, closes her eyes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you've enjoyed your trip aboard American Airlines flight AA2651 from Puerto Vallarta to Montreal. It's a beautiful evening here, about 15 degrees, 60

Fahrenheit. We ask that you please remain seated until the seatbelt sign is turned off. *Mesdames et Messieurs...*”

It feels good to stand, to feel the solid ground of the terminal pushing up against the soles of my runners. I rock back and forth in spot, gently coaxing the blood in my legs to circulate as I wait in the customs queue, my fingers stinging beneath their makeshift dressing of napkin shreds and saliva. Behind me, the window-seat woman is on the phone discussing dinner plans with someone she calls ‘hon’.

When we arrive at the baggage claim, I keep my eyes fixed straight ahead on the empty carousel. I can’t bring myself to look left to where the loved ones stand, to where I know he’s waiting for me. Not yet.

The bags start coming, but I don’t see mine yet. Everyone’s still hanging back for the most part except for the businessman, who stands with his arm outstretched over the moving conveyor belt, flexing his fingers open and closed as though it might speed things along.

“*Pardon,*” says my old seat neighbour in a surprisingly good Québécois accent, squeezing past me to grab her own red fabric suitcase. “Oh, hey you. How are the hands?”

I instinctively tuck them into my back pockets. “Better, thanks. I’ve got a cream at home that should help.”

“Good. And if that doesn’t work, you can always try a dose of the ol’ duty-free,” she quips, nodding towards the brown paper bag sticking out of my coat pocket.

I lift the bag and consider it for a moment. “Would you take this? Please?”

She furrows her brow. “What’s in it?”

“A shot glass. Shaped like a skull... There’s no blood on it if that’s what you’re worried about.”

She laughs. A warm, genuine laugh. “No, it’s not that. But I don’t get it. You don’t want it?”

I shake my head.

“Alright.” She takes it out of the bag, turns it over in her hands. “Thanks. I think I’ll give it to my daughter, she likes spooky things... you take care, now.”

“You too.”

I catch my old plaid suitcase coming down the conveyor belt just before it goes for another spin. I close my eyes, clench my hands into tight fists, willing them not to itch, and take a long, deep breath.

And then I turn around.

## A DEAD WOMAN WALKING

Argiro Mavraki

My body thins into smoke and waiting.  
I count the moments before she screams—  
the fury she thinks I earned  
by hiding what was already killing me.  
A song I've heard in other lives,  
yet it reaches me still.

*"I hate you"* she says—  
the only shield she has  
against what she fears to name.  
I remember the first cut  
of those syllables—  
now they linger,  
a phantom trailing my way.

Words are more than burden,  
they are iron and smoke,  
steel and silk,  
unreal yet undeniable.

I haunt that echo,  
chase it through the hush before dawn.  
She will regret it—  
kids always do.

As her mother, my love never fades.  
At times, I shut my eyes  
and watch her future bloom—  
a brilliance too clean, still colorless.

And I—  
I am the ghost beside it,  
a dead woman walking,  
buying myself more time.

# LOVE LEFT UNKOWN

Ruby Ellis

i speak your name  
to no one  
your existence  
is for my eyes only

a sorely sincere  
secret language,  
a glance that lingers  
languid bodies

lovely, meaningless remarks  
tying into the next time  
your mouth meets mine

a casualty of  
casualness

cautionary tale told  
in uncertainty and wanting

*a stranger and an instinct walk into a bar,  
who do you follow first?*

so blindly enveloped

silhouetted in black  
the strike of a match  
is nothing but solace

a sight of warning, a promise  
slowly warming, it glows

*please, come closer*  
*(don't come too close)*

disintegrating from desire into a body I don't know  
reignited solely with words, a subtle touch  
a soft wax at the flame  
when you say my name

and mean it

when you start the fire, but don't stay long enough  
to see it  
dangerous abandonment, *don't worry, i'll tend to it*  
if the heat has to hold me in its embrace, just know  
i'd rather melt,  
than burn

to surrender, to succumb  
to the stroke of your thumb  
on my ribcage this mindless, monotonous motion,

working mechanically  
with an inkling of love,  
being all that is necessary

to delve deeper  
drown in the shadow, a sea, a stranger  
hand to the throat, searching, burying  
an impulse, pulsing, a prayer  
in the night, caught in the air shared  
between your lungs

longing with the absence of emotion  
devoid of devotion, desperate  
to be intertwined

in the backseat of your car  
in the back of your mind

that is where  
my wanting lies

traces of limerence glimmering, gone, again  
ashes scattered, a ruined, unreachable place

sacred burial ground  
where a love left unknown  
will remain.

## THE HOOKER

E.P. Lande

He looked in the mirror...and saw a washed-up hooker. It was his 59th birthday. He was sad and depressed. Fifty-nine years, and what did he have to show for it?

He took another look. He had a good mop of hair...albeit thanks to implants. Salt and pepper, compliments of Just for Men. He now sported a trimmed beard...covering the dark spots that had started surfacing a few years back.

He took off his T-shirt. Not bad, he thought...for someone almost sixty. He still worked out, especially on days when he had a client. He sucked in his stomach. His six-pack was still there...though not quite as defined as it had been in the beginning... but then, what was?

He unbuckled his belt and let his jeans fall to the floor. The contour outlining his thighs was there... if he looked closely. With nostalgia, he touched the bulge in his 2(x)ist black briefs, groaning. Better leave that thought for tonight, he cautioned.

He turned to look at himself in profile. He flexed his triceps, showing remnants of the ribbons of muscles of yesteryear, his pecs bouncing to attention...before slouching.

His thoughts wandered to the evening ahead. A group of his client-friends had invited him to dinner. He knew what to expect: a repetition of fraudulent honesty—and he wasn't

looking forward to partying. Had he lost his momentum? It was part—perhaps the main part—of the rôle they expected of him, and each of them wanted to be part of his celebration.

But what would he be celebrating? Growing older? Getting high on pot, sucking dick, and fucking ass didn't appeal to him, and knowing his client-friends, that's what they expected because that's what they had been doing over the past 20-plus years when they got together.

Looking at a photo of himself taken at a beach party...was it thirty years ago? What a sexy motherfucker, he thought...before laying the photo face down.

He was tired, tired of his rôle, tired of their expectations, tired of the pretensions, and tired of the loneliness. All he wanted was to lie on his couch with a bottle of Coke and a basket of potato chips and watch a rerun of *I Love Lucy*. Perhaps...it was time to quit.

He asked Alexa to play “*Je ne regrette rien*” by his favourite chanteuse, Edith Piaf. Did he have regrets? Life *had* been good, he reminded himself.

After a few minutes, he went to his closet and chose his best slacks, his sexiest shirt, and a pair of Ferragamo loafers. Dressed, he opened his medicine chest and took out the vial of Viagra.

He glanced in the mirror one more time...and blew himself a kiss.

## WHERE WE WENT — OUR SEPARATE WAYS

Ruby Ellis

Nameless boy, nameless girl  
two children, play pretend twins, too small to be  
aware of how their bodies will develop meaning.  
A disputed destiny, determined on one unforgivable,  
faceless day—

For now it's pinky promises and birthday cakes,  
candles blown out with wobbly teeth,  
sticky hands licked clean from dripping ice cream,  
counting down the days until Christmas Eve.  
For now, the world is still their own, still  
whatever they want it to be.  
Both as stubborn as the other, wholeheartedly they believe  
in those little white lies.  
Soft skin untouched, aside from bruises and cuts  
dirt dug under fingernails and playing too rough.  
One house, same bath, two-syllable last name.  
Six years in a bunk bed they shared,  
and for every nightmare she had  
he was there.  
Believing their whole life  
will remain this way.

Until I woke up one time  
and you were stolen from out under me—  
For you, a swimming lesson at nine,  
and for me, ballet class at three.  
In the deep end, you held your breath,  
and bloomed, *dark blue*  
By the barre, I couldn't breathe,  
branded rebirth, *baby pink*. Laced into my ribbon shoes.

I longed for your limitless potential from afar,  
the sight of you swimming lengths in the ocean,  
fighting endurance, facing expansion—  
doesn't compare to my lessons suffered in silence  
from the leotard two sizes  
too small.

That tight, not quite right feeling that  
every thought, opinion, way of being  
is wrong.

The whistle blows, you run off into the void,  
a boy-  
Fixed in place, through no fault of my own,  
a fickle form I became—  
a girl.

Finding my footing in unfamiliar territory-  
*teenage idol, lip gloss teeth, sweet sixteen*  
what once was a romantic vision

now a violent reality.

Told too young how to be. How to act.

How to bleed and be quiet, how to stay

intact. Praised for sitting still and looking pretty. Punished

for pushing any and every boundary. All the while,

I watched you with practiced passivity—

Your voice dropped, determined

to be louder, larger, designed

to interrupt. A fist in the wall

at the slightest minor inconvenience, such as the one

I had become. Leaning back, legs spread, entitled

to take up space, a new discovery to be claimed,

forever moving forward with ferocity. An attribute

to be commended as ambitious—

for the same actions that would determine me ugly,

belligerent, badly behaved. I found that out the hard way

*(the only way.)*

Who could I have been, if only

I was left alone.

To exist unapologetically, in a body

that feels less like a trap and more like a home.

A fact or a form that isn't conditioned to contain

or prone to preventing me

from leaning into the ways I will grow—

Could I have been like you?

Would I want to?

I'd like to wonder—

But I would not like to know.

I know next to nothing about my mother's mother, save that we share a diagnosis. I know that she was a hooker — a rug hooker — and baked meat pies. I know that she swore like a sailor and gave my mother hell. I know next to nothing about my mother's mother, though there are a few things I do remember.

I remember the times before her treatments, the bottles of supplements and holistic tinctures that gathered into a massive mound, stealing a kitchen island to themselves.

I remember the sharpness in her eyes, the jump in her step as she paced across the kitchen, grumbling her theories of life and health and the vitamins she was sure would save her.

I remember other days barely seeing her at all, stumbling into her bedroom to find her lying clothed above the covers, eyes open but unfocused, staring greyly at the ceiling above her.

I remember when my doctor was elated to hear I had a similarly afflicted family member, when she asked me what treatments were working for my mother's mother.

I remember the innocence in her voice as she asked me to explain the three letters I had muttered, the initials behind which hid the bad thing, the thing in the movies, the thing they don't do anymore.

I remember my own mother explaining the treatment to me years before. It's not as bad as the movies make it seem. It doesn't leave a mark. No pain. Just a grey haze in the mind where something bad used to be, something my mother's mother would have preferred to forget, the memories my own mother now carries alone.

I remember my doctor's reply, with as much twinkling optimism as her eyes could muster, confronted with the uphill battle my family tree presented, that we'd be starting me off on the first-line treatments.

I remember they didn't work, as they so often don't, leaving me to wonder if my doctor ever really expected them to work, or if it was all just protocol — a pharmaceutical flow-chart, an endless maze of boxes and arrows, each turn leading me further from the light than I'd ever dared to venture before.

I remember all the while thinking of my mother's mother, how many treatments she was made to stumble through before reaching the end of the line, how the grey never really left her eyes, how the end of my line might look and if I'd even make it there.

But I remember eventually something worked — or, worked well enough — a deceptively bright little pill with promising initial data and a name overflowing with vowels, something I doubt my mother's mother had ever been offered.

I remember my doctor saying they'd caught me just in time, no hopeful vitamin hoards, no bad thing they don't do anymore, just an increased risk of heart disease, and a sympathetic shadow of grey in my eyes, a family resemblance neither of us managed to escape.

I know next to nothing about my mother's mother, though I hear she's been doing better lately.

## MADONNA AND CHILD

Anna Adhikary

It was December.  
I sat alone on a pew  
the sun strode into arched windows  
through panels glossy like hard candy  
draping Mary in brilliance.  
She stood bowed  
with the burden of knowing,  
of being left behind.

Candles burned endlessly  
incense blew a husky breath  
and I thought of you, my son.

My hands molded to dark oakwood  
my eyes followed those divine rays  
and shone onto Jesus,  
his scraggly face  
downcast, silent  
ribs like violin bows screeching  
on his arrested frame.

I went to join him at the altar –  
straightened my stooped back,  
feet pattering on the cracked

floorboards, my breaths leaping  
around the oval ceiling.  
The grave saints nodding as I reached him.

I noticed once that from no angle  
does Jesus ever meet my gaze.

If only you looked back at me  
like the glances between Madonna and her child.  
But you stare at your god,  
lips shivering in prayer, head tilted up.

How could I help myself from watching  
the harsh winter sun  
turn your green eyes  
lusher than Eden?

# THIS IS MY BODY

Tina Wayland

The harvest grows over the bones of the dead,  
fields bathed bloodshot in the last  
of the summer sun.

You lie in the space between the wheat,  
stalk caught in your kernel teeth,  
mouth the mill that grinds.

Drive the plow that devours the horizon,  
roll down the rows until the blades find you,  
the eater and the eaten.

When the rain comes raise your arms, open wide your jaw,  
pour your sunset communion down my throat.

I bless the fields

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to eat you, the unleavened. When I bring your seed back up  
the wheat grows again in spring.

## THE STEALING PATH

Elizabeth Kubyshyn

I once dreamt that I stood in a room with wooden floors, a tight bed in the corner and a washing basin at its foot. The plain walls were hung with vivid tapestries. And at the opposite end sat a woman, weaving on a loom. In and out, through and between, her hands moved in a gesture of music, while across from her, a mirror reflected a view of a town through its corrupting eye. The mirror—solely through which the woman could regard the world. From the window came the soft sound of water drifting through the stone canal, and pedestrians below treaded with the chime of leaves on the wind. She heard them laughing, existing in the way of beings entirely immersed in the world. I could tell the woman was in pain. To listen to the world but never touch it, to see it only in a defiled state. She succumbed completely to the work in front of her. Her loneliness was redeemed through it. And as I came closer, I saw emerging from the loom a story, which unfolded like this.

A man and a woman lived side by side in a village at the edge of a vast and obscure wood. Their house was indistinguishable from the others, scattered across the countryside as if someone had thrown them from the sky and left them there. They worked hard, hauling water from the well and feeding the cows. Leaving a precise, simple dent in the world. And at the end of the day, they came together to sleep in one bed and to dream one long, simultaneous dream.

One morning, the woman sat at the dining table. Looking out the window towards the bright, expansive meadow, she said to her husband, “Sometimes I get tired of doing the same thing again and again. It makes me bored and a little bit hopeless. It makes me want to cry.”

“You can cry,” he told her.

“I don’t want to.”

She left the house, setting out towards the stable and into the broadening day. This was life, after all; the honest act of splintering time with routine movements, hoping for a sporadic change. At least she had someone to do it with, a hand to hold and some common air to breathe.

When she came home that evening, an unfamiliar man was sitting in the kitchen. He was tall and had what seemed to be a completely smooth finish on the surface of his skin and clothes, so that light ran off of him like a mirage. “This is my brother,” her husband told her. “He is staying with us for two weeks.” The brother rose and took her hand in a gesture akin to greeting a flower. She sensed this to be one of those slivers of life where things felt different, if only for a short while.

The brother made himself useful very quickly. Rising from his cot early in the morning, he would light the stove and set the water to boil, then go out into the field to pull the last of the harvest. It was the edge of fall then, and the cool air purified his eyes, which were set on the spanning horizon. He turned as the woman came out of the house. Her breath ascended in a mist

above her head. She looked like an angel. He gazed out at her from across a wide expanse, watched her turn down the path, away from him and towards the chicken coop. He wondered what she thought about.

She imagined life to be the making of a braid. She folded what she had tightly upon itself, again and again, in the hope that she would be left, at the end of it, with a beautiful, coherent strand. But the pieces were becoming thinner now, and it was harder to make them hold, so that when she looked at her hands, all she saw was human frailty. Maybe she could have a baby, then there would be something new to absorb her time.

At midday, the brother came into the kitchen where she was resting her feet. He poured hot water into a mug with nettle leaves and handed it to her. They spoke like relatives, habitually and candidly, even though they had never met. He had been away for many years, gone to travel over a great stretch of mountains in an attempt to find something different, perhaps even worthwhile. He claimed he had. You could see it in the seams of his face. And after everything, he felt it was important to come back, to say hello.

“What did you see?” the woman asked.

“I saw a good piece of the earth. And I found that there is not much you can do for yourself out there that you cannot do from right over here.”

“But you had to leave in order to find that out. And you’ll leave again,” she responded.

“Well, yes, that is also true.” He laughed to himself over his contradiction.

A few days later, the woman was walking to the village well, and from the opposing direction came her husband and brother. They stopped and greeted each other. The men had been visiting a neighbour, and were carrying bags of grain. Hearing that she was out to collect water, the brother offered to carry it back for her. No one objected, and so the two set off while her husband took the sacks home. As they walked, the sun emerged from behind the clouds and washed the desiring earth. The dirt path seemed to glow. “Tell me something interesting,” she said to him. He seemed to her the most compelling person she had ever known.

“Have you ever seen a circus elephant?” he asked.

“No,” she replied, and was suddenly seized by an immense fear that she had outgrown the perimeter of her life.

Time passed quicker now, and they felt that the brother had become embroidered into even the subtlest material of their lives. The work was divided better. Everything felt weightless. The three of them would labour for half the day, then as late afternoon set in, they would retreat to the house and drink hot ale, or walk in their heavy coats past the houses to the creek. With the early frost came a thin snow. Once, when the woman slipped on a curve in the ground, the brother called after her, telling her to bend to it. To submit, like a bird on a stream of wind. She would hurt herself less.

The brother always had a story, and it made the woman feel as though she could also do the things he'd done, maybe one day gaze upon the dusky sea. He made her husband act like a boy again, and she caught herself at times laughing like a little girl. Sometimes the brother spoke about where he would go next. He wanted to find the biggest tree he might ever lay his eyes on, and stand right next to it so he could feel very small. That futility was a virtue the woman hadn't known. She found herself saying, in her deepest recesses, *I want to go with you, I want to do everything with you*. But then, to think of him leaving was always too painful, so she pushed it far out of her mind.

One evening, the woman's husband became ill. He was very cold and went to bed. Through the door, he could hear his wife and brother talking. They got along well. He could tell his wife was fond of him, but he didn't really mind. That was the inclination—to never have much feeling. To lead cleanly and unobstructedly a life that could only become what it was meant to be. He heard his wife laugh. His brother would have to go soon. He worried a bit, then fell asleep. When he woke it was dark, and he went outside for some fresh air. Far ahead, he saw two figures in the pasture, drifting on the fine thread where the black land met the deep blue sky. At this distance, they were very small. One couldn't tell if they were moving closer or farther, and in the inscrutability of the fleeting light, it appeared that they were running.

Then it came time for the brother to leave. The woman stood where the gate opened onto the dirt road. *This stealing path*, she thought, seeing how it led away into the thick forest. Her husband stood beside her. He hugged his brother, kissed him on the cheek, then stepped aside for her to say goodbye. She was quiet. She held the brother by the shoulders and kissed him on the cheek as well. After this, he turned and began walking towards the trees.

The husband looked around himself. There was the solemn road, the supple mist, the white, satin sun. And knots began to fill his body. Suddenly, it seemed to him that beyond the boundaries of his immediate vision there was nothing. It was being cut away. Those things his brother had seen were entirely his own.

His wife watched his brother's back for a moment longer, then also turned, walking towards the house. It made one deeply sad to notice that the binding of life was loneliness. That the natural form is of absolute oneness, from which we have been separated and brought down to heed a solitary call. He wanted very badly to reach out and touch her, or tell her anything she might want to hear. But he couldn't, for she was already several steps away.

ROTHKO NO.3/NO.13, 1949

Louise Carson

From the bottom up the green of childhood,  
adolescence. The gold light of creation.  
Midlife's blank black slate takes up  
too much space, too much suffering  
to get to the gold light again,  
the coming through to age, a sacred violet.  
But always the red anxiety running around  
and through it. You bastard, Rothko,  
you bastard.

## CONTRIBUTORS

From the West Island of Montreal, **Megan Au** is a first-year Creative Writing student at Concordia University. Her poems, “Pulse,” “Trypanophobia,” and “Paranoia,” were published in John Abbott College’s Locus Magazine. She claims she loves writing in every genre equally, but always returns to the supernatural. More often than not, you can find Megan with a matcha.

**Anna Adhikary** is a second year student studying Creative Writing at Concordia University in Montreal. She enjoys writing about magic and in the first person.

**Brooklyn Beverly** was born a 35-year-old man in rural Nova Scotia, growing up in the awkward middle ground between grey rocky shorelines and green rolling highlands. They escaped at their first opportunity, setting off on the carefully plotted life plan they had drawn up at the age of 12 (mentally 47). Somehow, they made a home in Montreal, carving out a small, cozy living from which they could watch their meticulous plans crumble like sandcastles at high tide — if anyone reading this is considering medical school, don’t. Now, perpetually adrift and clinically homesick, they write because they can. With each word, they anchor themselves to all they have left behind, occasionally paying homage to the storm-tossed romance of the sea-bound coast.

**Hayley Bleho** is a Montreal musician and writer. A graduate of Concordia University in English Literature and Music, she is currently working on her debut EP, Rabbit Rabbit (forthcoming winter 2026). Hayley also co-hosts the radio program LEKTOR DECODER on CJLO 1960AM. You can find her on Instagram @hayleybleho.

**Corvus Campbell** is an artist from ləkʷəŋən territory trying to become less frustrated by the limits of language. Their work focuses on the connections and boundaries that sustain us. Currently living in Tiohtià:ke, they spend their time reading, writing, and missing the Salish Sea.

**Louise Carson** lives in a bungalow surrounded by gardens. She paid for it by teaching music. Now she just writes.

**Joe Davies's** short fiction has appeared in *The Dublin Review*, *eFiction India*, *PRISM*, *The New Quarterly*, *Stand*, *Queen's Quarterly* and a few other publications. He lives in Peterborough, Ontario.

**Sophie Dufresne** (he/they) studies creative writing at Concordia University in Tio'tia:ke/Montreal, Canada. He fell in love with poetry after reading "Hope" by Emily Dickinson in sixth grade and is now interested in the way form informs content (or is it the other way around?). He is currently the copy editor of The Encore Poetry Project. He has been published by LBRNTH, Ahoy, The Encore Poetry Project (before joining it), Frozen Sea, and others.

**Ryan Di Francesco** is a Canadian writer and teacher. He began as a freelance writer, with work featured in The Toronto Star and outlets across North America, before turning his focus to poetry and fiction. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Shadow and Sax*, an emerging literary and arts press, and the author of two chapbooks — *The Paper Hound* (Alien Buddha Press) and *Skeleton Mine Disaster* (Bottlecap Press). His poems and stories have appeared in journals including *ELJ Editions*, *Shoegaze Literary*, *The Pit Periodical*, *Ink in Thirds*, *Bicoastal Review*, *SQUID Magazine*, *Shine Quarterly*, among others. He also co-wrote the indie film *Streets of Wonderland*, which won multiple festival awards.

No bio given for **Ruby Ellis**.

Blessed with unflappable Ontarian twang, **Silas James** is a queer and trans writer based in Tiohtià:ke/Montréal. You might've seen him trailing around town, aperol spritz in hand, or daydreaming while serving you an aperol spritz at his bartending gig. He loves crosswords and Jesus.

**Elizabeth Kubyshyn** is a student at Concordia University studying English Literature. She lives in Montreal.

**E.P. Lande**, born in Montreal, lived in France and Vermont. He taught at l'Université d'Ottawa (Vice-Dean) and owned country inns. More than 100 of his stories have found homes all over, "Expecting" nominated for Best of the Net. "Aaron's Odyssey", a gay-romantic-psychological thriller, has recently been published in London. "To Have It All", a psychotic thriller, was published this July. Argentine tango "Dancing With Katie", a sweet-romance, will be published later this year.

**Argiro Mavraki** is a Concordia student majoring in English Literature. Passionate for theatre, writing and movies, she can be found at quiet coffee shops with a book on one hand and a pen in the other.

**Sage Milnthorp** (she/her) is a lesbian writer originally from amiskwaciwâskahikan (edmonton, alberta) but currently residing in tiohtià:ke (montreal). In her freetime, sage enjoys taking the metro and people watching, making her friends laugh and trying to bake the world's best chocolate chip cookie. In her authorial work, sage explores themes of the natural world, passion, queer and otherworldly affection, friendship, common humanity and everyday epiphanies. She draws inspiration from the works of james baldwin, mary oliver, joan didion, richard siken, adrienne lenker, and whatever other wonderful author she is reading at the moment.

Montreal-native **Sabrina Roberts** is a twenty-year-old aspiring writer who is currently a second-year Communications and Marketing student at Concordia University. She is passionate about poetry and storytelling.

**Yael T. Uribe** is a queer Mexican writer and poet based in Tiohtià:ke. Initially admitted into med school, they are now in their last year of the Honours program in English and Creative Writing. Their poetry is confessional in nature, exploring themes like memory, seasons, the passage of time, late-night kitchen conversations and everything in between. Their work has been published in *Encore Poetry Project*, *Room Magazine*, *EVENT Magazine* and more.

**Toby Walma** is finishing his Bachelor's at Concordia University and pursuing playwriting in Montreal. He is an alumni of Playwright Workshop Montreal's Young Creators Unit.

**Tina Wayland** holds an MA in Creative Writing from Concordia, winning the department's McKeen Award in 2021 and 2023. She's published in such places as *carte blanche*, *Headlight*, *yolk*, and *LBRNTH*, and longlisted for the 2021 CBC Nonfiction Prize. Tina is currently writing a book about her Lithuanian grandmother, funded by the Canada Council for the Arts.

