

SOLILOQUIES ANTHOLOGY 30.2

NEPO-BABY:
JUMP AHEAD

WORD-COUNT
EXCEEDED

SMOKE BREAK

MANIC PIXIE
DREAM GIRL

WRITER'S BLOCK:
TWO STEPS BACK

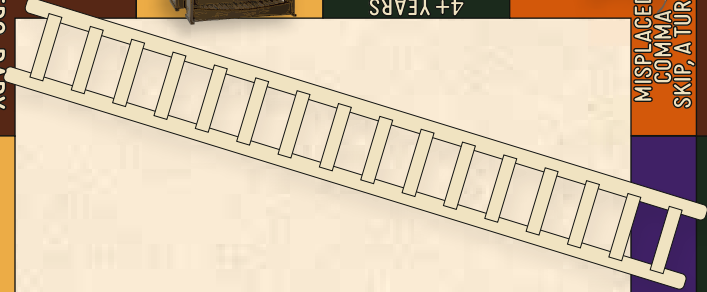
CORRUPTED FILE:
BACK TO START

4+ YEARS
BARISTA
EXPERIENCE

MISPLACED
COMMA
SKIP, ATURN

POMEGRANATE
METAPHOR

KILL YOUR
DARLINGS



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

This is the second issue of our 30th anniversary year, and it came together the way things often do during the school term: slowly, arduously, with too many tabs open and heads cluttered by images, ideas and phrases that kept returning in slightly different clothing. We read hundreds of submissions, but certain works resurfaced on loop like they had been delightfully mis-hung in the wrong closets. Those are the ones you'll find here: not necessarily the loudest, but the ones that seem to have stuck.

It feels necessary to name the people who made this possible. Our utterly cool-headed masthead carried the issue with a kind of attention that has become a precious resource. Gratitude goes out to our prose and poetry editors whose close reading uncovered parallel drafts beneath the firsts, the Managing Editor who weathered deadlines and submissions, our Social Media Manager and Graphic Designer who shaped the visual language and our Web Content team whose words (finally) appear in print on these pages, and who kept the journal moving online week after week. Nothing here was achieved solo.

To have helped bring two issues into life during Soliloquies' thirtieth year has been a real genuine pleasure and a crash-course in becoming. As I retire from my tenure as co-editor-in-chief, and of undergraduate studies, I reflect on what we built collectively, and on the vast choir of Canadian and visiting voices I got to hear here for the first time.

Foster Gareau,
Co-Editor-in-Chief

I have infinite gratitude for the community of writers, both residing here in Montreal as well as the rest of Canada, who have placed their faith and trust into our project. This edition, we were blown away by the number of submissions that you sent to us, and I would like to extend my thanks to each one of you. Among the hundreds of works we received, only a handful can be found on the preceding pages. However, regardless of if they made it to print, we genuinely cherished the opportunity to review each piece. This anthology could not have made it thirty years if it were not for each writer who entrusted us with their creative works each edition—a process which we certainly recognize to be vulnerable.

I must take the time to thank you: our reader. Your support for our project is so, *so* significant to us. I have infinite appreciation for your endorsement as we fulfill our mandate to promote diverse written voices from Montréal and Canada regardless of experience. We strive to continue to meet your expectations in future iterations of this anthology. I am so excited for you to read what we have put together.

While 30.1 considered the abstract, carrying us into the skies, the following works keep us grounded. These pages will invite you to reflect on our origins, our histories, and where we situate ourselves. We take this opportunity to reflect on finality, to reflect on how our pasts have altered us, whether for the better or worse. As my tenure as Co-Editor-In-Chief comes to a close, I cannot imagine a more fitting issue to have had the pleasure of compiling.

Micaela Day,
Co-Editor-in-Chief

THE RESURRECTIONISTS

Kendyl Daley

They were three at the foot of the campus, their shoulders square in their wool overcoats, standing idle as the wind whipped their faces. Two were old friends and had met earlier in the night at the counter of a dark pub where they had drunk like fish. A third student joined them later at the outskirts of the schoolyard, a quiet François or Joseph that they did not know from class. Unlike the pair, he was sheepish, toying with the sleeves of his coat, and in the few minutes of their meeting, he compulsively checked his watch. He would not meet their eyes.

Rows of wrought iron fence circled the property and congregated at the entrance of the campus. The main gate stood in lavish stone, the twin incisors grey and gnashing. Each man who passed through its shadow knew he belonged here; he knew the work of his father, and his father's father, had granted such an education at the esteemed McGill University. The Arts building stood stately in the distance, and from it a cobblestone tongue rolled out lecherously, converging with the sludge of the street. The straggling street lamps hissed into the night, their gas bulbs flickering, their yellow gleams glittering coronas in the falling snow. Save for the odd passing carriage, the road was quiet; black horses passed in slow trot, their owners likely slumped inebriate from an evening at the tavern.

Against the charcoal sky, the mountain's spine rippled majestically, an ancient, pine-marked beast obscured only by the limestone campus. On black haunches, Mont Royal sat leering at the regal buildings, peppered militant and unmistakable in the heart of the city.

Their ascent had begun. Toboggans, dragged by limp arms, slid along the walkway with a squeal. Bundles of blankets were piled on the sleds, concealing the tools required for the outing: two crowbars and coils of rope. The boys fell into a natural formation, both friends in the lead, their foreign voices spitting into the wind. Each held an oil lantern, slinging upturned halos onto the path. The third man hung behind, left in darkness, his nervous hands tucked into his coat, his chin pressed into his jacket against the biting cold.

After passing McGill's campus, they turned onto McTavish Street; their legs began to burn, resisting the will of the rising incline, and their bellies burned with liquor, sending bottled warmth into their hands and their flushed, rosy cheeks. The drunken pals chuckled and shoved each other about, their toboggans weaving to and fro behind their lurching gaits.

“And what will we be paid this time around, ol' chap?” Three sheets to the wind, Bill Jones clapped his friend on the back.

“Oh, I dunno, Bill. Fifty a pop or so.” Money was not Ed Goldman's priority.

“Not bad. I figured we’d be getting more with the shortage lately. I suppose it makes sense, with the new shipments from the States—they come from fields in the South, y’know. Prof gets them dirt cheap.”

The boys laughed some more and continued on their way, their breath bubbling skyward in white plumes with each heave of their chests. Both were medical students; both had made the journey before. Hustling like mules, they conquered the mountain, climbing the street named for the Marquis Simon McTavish, so rich with fur and blood. There, among the glamour of the Golden Square Mile, their eyes glittered with drink and the twinkle of oil lamps hung from ornate windows, the light reflecting in their eyes like coins poured across their gaping irises.

In their stupor, they did not realize that their companion had fallen behind and was fighting a losing battle with the enemy hill. Before long, he turned around, never besting that steep incline, the slush giving way beneath the worn soles of his boots. Perhaps he was too daunted by the task at hand; perhaps he feared repercussion. Perhaps the cross, suddenly heavy around his neck, also weighed heavy on his conscience. When the boys realized, they had a good laugh, figured him a freshman, and called him green.

“It’s a wonder he didn’t stick it out,” Bill mused. “The poor sod needs the money more than we do.”

Bill and Ed had never known a life outside of luxury. Upon starting their degrees, they traded their uptown family homes for the limestone and terraces south of the mountain—a new neighborhood, burgeoning around the nascent McGill University. They lived like kings in rented rooms, rarely troubled, rarely writing to their families, and drinking often with their charming classmates.

In time, they were no longer comforted by streetlamps or the familiar assurance of their campus. On the base of Mont Royal, trees sprang like gangrene fingers stiff with death, the stubborn incline of the land forever rising. Snow settled in white sheets, soon broken beneath their wandering boots and the trails of their toboggans, which carved a subtle signature in the virgin snow. The operations required night, and they required cold; this way their cargo could be cavaliered down the mountain without witnesses, and without smell.

The boys walked through the silent cemetery in the pearled haze of night. Above their heads, the full moon was a glass eye unblinking, and the geography of shadowed headstones was not unlike their beloved Montreal skyline. Bill imagined himself as a giant, unstoppable, stepping over buildings and blocks of city streets.

When they were halfway through the cemetery, Ed summoned a silver flask from the inner pocket of his coat, bedecked with the Goldman family crest.

“Bill—look what *I’ve* got.”

“Never too late for the old English whiskey, is it?”

They had each taken a hearty swig, the flask winking in the moonlight, when the golden ring of a lantern appeared at the edge of the property. A stranger was hobbling slowly in their direction. The boys froze—but it was too late. The groundskeeper raised his lantern and spotted their forms in the darkness. A whistle pierced the night, and like horses to a starting pistol, Ed and Bill scattered, limbs flailing, their drunken laughter rattling through the cemetery. Bill zigged, Ed zagged, and they clambered over gravestones, grey and crooked as broken teeth; stones were toppled, and bouquets were trampled, the withered petals left scattered in their wake. They tore between the rows, fleeing hunched and clumsy; a sure disturbance to the sleepers couched in dirt beneath their feet.

During the commotion, Ed and Bill spotted the Deadhouse at the back of the cemetery, the humble crypt wedged in the treeline on the northern slope of the mountain. They took shelter behind the stone building, a mass of arms and legs and poorly stifled laughter, collapsing breathless into the snow. Ed produced the flask, and they drank and drank, suckling at the silver lips of victory, the liquor bubbling from their pink mouths. The lantern lingered in the distance, a cyclopean eye orange in the black of night, but the groundskeeper eventually lost interest. Slick as weasels and strangers to consequence, the boys charged on.

Ed pried open the door to the Deadhouse, where coffins lined the wooden shelves from floor to ceiling. The winter soil was too frozen to dig new graves, and so bodies were left waiting in the Deadhouse until spring.

“Alright, get to work,” sighed Ed. “The fewer pearls, the better. We don’t want any fuss.”

With crowbars swinging, they wrenched those coffins open, pouring the light of their lanterns onto the sickly, frigid faces. Paupers were their usual target, for they would not be missed. Nor would any trouble follow orphans, the destitute, the insane, or convicts left unclaimed after a pestilence outbreak—the poor souls met with equal disregard, in life and in death. Darker faces were chosen for their lack of trouble, and any qualm raised by families inferior or foreign would surely be squashed by the boys’ fathers. At times, when the odd young bourgeois were uncovered, clothes, watches, and jewelry would be left behind for fear of theft charges. The body, however, was fair game.

Though the years were rife with death, McGill’s medical school suffered a shortage of cadavers. The government pledged to provide bodies for aspiring young doctors, for whom dissection classes were a graduation requirement; but alas, when the government failed to provide enough corpses, McGill students took the issue into their own hands. Located conveniently north of the university, bodies from the Mont Royal cemeteries were packed onto toboggans and slid down the mountain, later smuggled into McGill’s anatomical theatre for

dissection the next morning. Students were paid by the Faculty of Medicine for each stolen body, and for the risk involved: the resurrectionists faced arrest, fines, or worse—the ire of polite society, who thought such a macabre pastime was in poor taste. French students, often working-class, needed the money for tuition. The Anglophones, however, hunted for sport.

Before long, Ed and Bill settled on an adequate cadaver: a middle-aged man with high cheekbones, a wide nose, and tan skin. In a well-practiced dance, they each grabbed a stiff arm and ripped him from his resting place.

“Did you see the score of the game last night?”

Ed pulled the man’s shirt over his head.

“I did indeed. Can’t believe Harvard stuck it to us that badly.”

Pockets were padded. A gold ring was removed. Bill contemplated keeping it.

“I know. It’s a waste of money to even buy a ticket these days.” Ed did away with the man’s black breeches and the white drawers underneath, and they threw the clothes into a pile. With great care, Bill mournfully placed the ring on top of the crumpled belongings.

“Remind me to tell you about the plans for winter break. We can stay up north at my uncle’s cabin—he’s a bigwig at Hudson Bay and has posts up there.”

Ed grabbed a blanket and laid it flat on one of the toboggans, before continuing: “You can invite your sister too. I know mine will be joining.”

“Sure thing, though last I heard, Mary had fallen ill. I ought to write. Though I wouldn’t complain if it were just us boys, up north...a stocked liquor cabinet...”

Their cackles filled the Deadhouse as they mummified the man and strapped him to the sled. As Ed and Bill pried open more coffins, their habitants were made the butt of easy jokes—about better days and bullet holes and mean-looking mugs.

Half-empty-headed, Ed shoved his crowbar into another coffin and popped the lid. Dangling his lantern over the body, he was struck by a horror so deep, he jolted up straight as if electrocuted; he drilled his head on the wooden shelf above him, dropped his lantern into the coffin, and fell awkwardly onto the floor. His mouth agape, he raised a quivering arm, a single ominous finger pointed toward the open casket, now glowing an eerie yellow in the darkness.

“What, Ed? What is it?”

Bill contemplated killing Ed if this were a trick. Still, he felt his heart hammering against his ribcage; the sound felt unbearably loud amongst the silence of stagnant hearts. The room was colder than before—only then did he notice the wet musk of death, hanging sour in the air. His footfalls sounded in the shadows as he approached the

coffin and peered inside. The crowbar slipped from his hand with a dull thud, and falling to his knees, he began to heave and heave; then, the gagging started, and he was sick, thinking, *I've wasted all that English whiskey, right here on the Deadhouse floor.*

A young woman, still beautiful, lay inside the coffin, as if a sleeping saint. Her hair was combed into golden pleats, resting on her white burial gown. Her lashes were long and fine, still perfectly arranged. Beneath the halo of the lantern, her sallow face was bright as the moon.

Mary.

When the boys found their feet again, they fled. They left the man, bundled in the Deadhouse. They left the groundskeeper wondering which dolt had dropped their Goldman family flask at the door of the ravaged crypt, before he promptly turned it over to the police.

CONVOCATION

Why am I always the one that calls
the strong one, unassailable
the one who absorbs
the turned cheek
the stoic
the secret crier
expecting the same standards from everyone else
and hurt, surprised
by their obvious easy acceptance
that
it's okay to ignore me,
to make me work for it
it's alright
for them
to excuse themselves?

But when they ignore you...
I'm sorry, I say to my daughter, they're not coming.

I usually excuse them
except
comes a time
a point
a line crossed
when I see what's happened
and it all just seeps away.

Crushed by the failures, non-events
buoyed by each small success
then levelled by inattention
atrophy
I sit
and wait
summing it up.
Tonight I will dream
I am singing 'Lush Life'
to a spellbound audience.

*

Tomorrow I will read
the email that alerted those with cellphones to a half-hour's delay
of my daughter's convocation –
traffic on the bridge –
but today I'm just pissed off,
forced to listen for more than an hour
to someone's mix of sentimental favourites –
'Unforgettable' in particular grates –
and to the gabble of families – larger, longer-lived,
more dutiful than ours.

A woman with a fucking army of relatives,
gestures at the long row of seats to my right.
Are any of these taken? Do you have anyone? she says.
No, I reply, sourly. I haven't. Take them.

Alphabetized, you sit with your class.
The speeches are forgettable. Another girl wins all the prizes.
You look bemused.

The best part is the tall piper's pure song
leading you in and out – amazing bright youth,
hatted, cloaked in black.

A VOICE SET AFLAME

I was born from a whisper never fully spoken,
a cry that never made it out of the cradle.
My mouth was sewn shut, my name trapped in my throat
before I ever learned the sound of it.

There is a version of me
still hiding in the basement,
stuffed full of silence like insulation,
mouthing my misery through the floorboards.

When the voices in my home told me to hush,
they didn't know they were killing me,
chiseling a suicidal cathedral from my chest.
They didn't know my ribs held rows of empty pews,
each one waiting for a voice that would not come.
They didn't know that my throat was a
shattered window, letting something holy howl its way out.

Can you hear me now?
The hum of the daughter who survived
in the crackle of my mother's pills.
The voice I set aflame just to feel its warmth
licks at the walls of my lungs,
smoke curling, crawling its way out,
spilling out in sparks I can't swallow back,
growing louder, louder, louder in sweet spring's defeat.

I fear becoming the silence that raised me.
Instead, I yearn to be the sound
that burns the house down.

ORGANS

I remember running down the aisle
Blue dress
Fluttering, waist ties
Streaming behind me

I remember sitting
Swinging my legs, giggling
The rest of your
Grandchildren joining

I remember my cousin
Eleven, banging on the organ
And me, delight
Twirling round beside him

Inappropriate, some people thought

I know now
You would have found it hilarious

I know, I know

ODE

The ice shattered beneath my foot. It looked like a shooting star that couldn't stick the landing. It pulsed as the world pulled it apart, its body a constellation of broken limbs limp on the concrete. My boots wet from the kill. //

Jay told me these boots make me look like a masc lesbian. Their words hit my eardrums and melted under the heat of percussion; the low hum of the ζ sound in *lesbian* softened my ear canal like moisturizer. I thought this may be girlhood. The word *girl* forces your tongue to curl. As if your mouth is scared to let the word leave your lips. The hard *g* sound turning tongue to hook, fishing for alternative diction—the word *girl* is dense with realization, thick and sticky on the palate like peanut butter. How to describe how *girl* feels like *hurt* in my mouth? //

The ice shattered. The little jagged star stepped on and destroyed. Its shards dislodged from its body like bones popping out of their sockets, a skeleton deconstructed. I closed my eyes. I thought of how winter made my blood hot and the sky grey, memories sauced cherry red, running through me like bullets. I thought of that one winter when Hudson and I were kids, playing forts outside in the snow as my dad dug holes for us to hide in. Finding pieces of rabbit feces underneath a sleeping berry tree that never bore fruit, how those pieces of shit astonished us; how we looked for the rabbit, and never found it, eyes bright as streetlights under the darkening winter sky. All I could say was *ew* and *wow*. I didn't think of the boots I was wearing back then. Of the way the leather suffocated my feet. Of the sweat pooling in my socks as I kicked up mud and slush. I didn't think of

how masculine I seemed standing on thickset soles, laces undone and laying on the tips of my shoes like messy hair sprawled along a woman's shoulders. I didn't think of what the snow was losing when I molded it into something new. But still, when I saw myself in the mirror that winter day as I was taking off my snowpants—cheeks red, nose snotty, lips wet—I thought *em. Wom.* //

I wanted to bend down and touch what I had killed. Hold it and tell it a secret. Instead, I looked at the larger chunk of the corpse still laying next to my boot. I looked at it and waited. Nothing happened. I gave the sidewalk a glance. I muttered a wish. I tied my laces and kept walking.

EASTERN KINSWOMAN OF THE MOON

Kendyl Daley

At nineteen, I caught a wandering bug and bought a bus ticket from Montreal to New York City. My head was big with city life and the American Dream. Deep inside, I was to be a poet and writer and singer; the city charmed me.

That night in March, I was soon to sleep in the back of the near-empty bus, lulled by the whips of passing lights, orange as tiger bullets. By seven a.m., I would be taking the Big Apple by strategy.

Instead, a gruff hook of a voice lodged itself into my ear and parted the blue Moquette curtains, yanking me back to life. The bus driver. Last call. By some lead-footed catastrophe, we'd arrived four hours early, and there I was, alone in Manhattan at four in the morning. No hotel room, no sense of direction, no phone service. Nothing but a leather coat and a backpack.

Half-dead and drooling, I stumbled into the biting cold. The bus pattered away, and with it, my last attachment to civil life. Madison Square Garden was a colosseum reborn, and stubborn buildings jutted into the sky. I staggered in slack-jawed orbit, the sights a shock to my bucolic New Brunswick youth. My fellow riders scattered, surely to homes and hotel rooms. My mental pleas went unanswered, as no one brought me in tow.

I wandered into a nearby train station, where I was met by dodgy cops and dozens of folks left to slip through the cracks of life's subway grate—left in limbo between winter and the fleeting warmth of passing trains. Without tickets, they were not allowed beyond the gnashing jaws of a sabre-toothed gate. Neither was I. Without tickets, there was nothing, not even a seat. Only a long hallway, ceramic tiles like dusty white scales, etched in grime and graffiti, and dotted with tired faces. The city settled cruelly into corners and wormed into sleeping bags, settled cold and white, save for the canned glow of an Auntie Anne's pretzel shop, the slotted gate a steel reminder that I was a fifteen-minute vagabond left to fly by night.

A few stragglers had enthusiastic comments about my youth and face. I was not offering the requested services. One woman with leather skin and a voice like shredded velvet took to following me around. Vulgarities backfired from her tailpipe lips, along with other nighttime propositions. I was disturbed. Not because I was stranded in a crowded train station or peppered by the wandering eyes of men, nor was it the worry of being a young woman outnumbered at night. It was the woman's antics; some web of solidarity had fallen away between us.

With the woman on my tail, I resorted to the American Cops, their hands fastened to their vests, their guns slung heavy on their hips. "Help," I said. *I have nowhere to go. I have come all this way with my eyes closed; do not make me open them now, for the dream is fading. I am feeling neither like*

Kerouac nor Ginsburg. Help me spare the illusion. From one Kevlar sage I received the words:

Tick Tock Diner. Twenty-four hours. Down the street to the left.

So, it was back into the night again. The diner was not hard to find, as the neon letters coughed electric onto the sidewalk, having never shaken the lingering disco fever. In quick bursts, I charged the street, my head on a swivel, fearing that the imagined brood of night-time evil-doers were indeed nipping at my heels, ready to pounce. At the door of the Tick Tock Diner, I experienced the baptismal American neon. Airborne and lucent, the electric lights beckoned me, a mirage in the concrete desert, an oasis of hydrogenated oil.

A small man with a comb over greeted me at the door. My inner animal steered me toward a booth in the back corner of the restaurant. The booths were waxy, Chiclet coloured, and lined the floor like gapped teeth. Here, the spirit of the sixties had death rattled and died, succumbing to the concussion of the new millennium, the roaming yellow rash of the drop ceiling, the white needle of LED.

I sheltered in my newfound citadel, my back pressed against the peeling green wallpaper, far from strangers lurching past the wide windows, or fellow diners seeking refuge in the candy-coloured alcoves. I pictured myself, leather shoulders hunched and tired eyes haggard, in the corner of Hopper's *Nighthawks*. When prompted, I ordered an

omelet and hash browns. The waiter asked if I'd have American Cheese. "Yes," I said, feeling distinguished. *Yes, I will have the American Cheese. This is the Land of the Free.* I anticipated a sharp, white cheese, and for my biceps to bulge like Popeye.

I received an anemic, greasy omelet, an impenetrable pile of shredded potato. The cheese may have been plastic, but it had melted into its primordial form. The coffee was strong and burnt. Each packet of Splenda was tattooed with a minute image of the illustrious star-spangled banner. *This is what it's all about,* I thought. It was the most patriotic coffee I ever had.

East of my booth, a lady was negotiating the price of her nightly services. Elsewhere, a still head. Later, the still head had been still for too long and was kicked out for loitering. I struggled to finish the plate and swallowed my disillusionment in small bites. I drank coffee in gulps, for fear of extradition. Eyeing the geography of my plate, all of America was folded into those golden pleats before me, and conquering the summit, I looked out from the glorious, oil-slick potato mountain, like the *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. I saw the country for what it was: the ash-flecked, gum-crustled, belly-up interior beneath the veneer of abundance. This was the truest American experience a young traveller could have had: to float like a buckled cigarette down the gullet of empty streets, into the gaped mouth of a rusted subway grate, past the pained faces and empty pockets, past the glint of black guns and

high-rise buildings fit for kings, to flounder with all the privilege of a momentary pauper.

If I were Kerouac, there'd be a young chick working and I'd order apple pie and chat her up. I'd say *I'm the western kinsman of the sun, I've roared from Quebec and out of New York City and all the world has led me to your counter so we can make it for the night.*

But it was just me and the Dame and her clients and the little man with the comb over. I am no eastern kinswoman of the moon. My face was white with fear: a pale moon warped and petrified, eyeing me in the black mirror of my coffee cup, the burnt and fickle crystal ball.

No world has opened wide and swallowed me up. I won't drag my heels along the road with my thumb to the sky for fear of death or worse. I can bury my chin in my coat and tote a minor on my arm, but I will be no unwashed phenomenon, no free-wheeling laureate serpent.

The sixties beat is gone.

Come sun-up, I had inhaled enough coffee to make my eyeballs vibrate and had written a few poems about the night. I felt far from home, far from the past, the America I thought remained. I thought of my mother at home in bed, oblivious to my antics. After forking out a dirty twenty, I slouched back down the street, raddled and reborn, spitting curses for the dirtbag womanizer I could never be; spitting curses for Kerouac and Dylan and Cohen. I thought of Janis, thought

of Joni; I was cold and certain that the dream had died, if it had ever lived at all.

AN ABBREVIATED INVENTORY OF LOST PLACES

It's like how a demolished church still
seeks disciples, hands clasped for a forlorn
return. How bankrupt buffets crave their fill
of families, crimson booths touch-starved and torn.

How abandoned choir rooms, larynges
stripped, still hum an off-key coda. How
playgrounds alight in an arsonist's binge
still dream of sandaled swinging. Even now

years after, as I watch myself adrift
beneath a lover, I recall
how some survivors say the body's a gift
and not some boarded-up strip mall

calling me home to its concrete skin.
How hollowed prayer, no way back in.

FREE RECALL

It was a short skirt, but could be blue jeans—
fraying threads falling floorward. A sundress,
pink one-piece, or leggings, perhaps—all careened
around clearance corners. A blazer pressed

beneath morning's iron, or stilettos
piercing carpet. Leather jacket, over-
sized, rhinestones spilling down the sleeve. Juxtapose
excess with a cropped tee, a pullover

if it's chilly. I'm told to prefer the cold
since stripping only goes so far in heat,
but dressed red with shame, all I wanted was to hold
the clothes against me. I wanted sheet

upon sheet of fabric, boa lifelines and zipper teeth.
Burning upon burning to forget the fingers underneath.

The dépanneur men are all out of cigarettes

And you're not such an idle smoker yourself
Upon the freshly mowed Lafontaine grass
Suffering the lovesick grasp
Of so many white clovers

Two months will pass in paychecks
Their weeks will tumble into thunderstorm
As the pawn shop ripples barely reach the concrete shore
As Cherrier's broken intersection pulses a four-way stop
through the turgid night

Oh Louis, may your supple blues
Blow through the beckoning cedars
And the love of park bench companions

The happiness I envy in their brick and mortar eyes
Your blues whip upon the courtyard today
Just as the proud edifice crosses its arms
Defiant against the dancing birds

Oh Louis, your ripe blues may blow themselves away
While the city swears no fealty
And the tenement people advance on midnight
Wielding their opus cards like prison shivs

The maples have gone red
The pétanques court is spattered with their blood
And your shadow crunches along the gravel beside me

Through the lull of partyless days
Poised to crumble like rotten corks in bitter wine

Suddenly I say *tell me a story*
you cannot always look through me like a kaleidoscope
And then you shake your head, pointing
At the leaves the trees refuse to relinquish
Grasping at their glory days like an aged trumpeter
With arthritis tied joints and no strength in his lungs

I revel in the petty distance of your affection
While you ball your fists in your pockets
Dreams are cheap, you say, even yours

And I can't remember if you ever left me feeling satisfied,
But no matter, it's likely 5:57
And already dark outside.

A CREATION STORY

The River People renewed our will
and traced the Planet's blood—
as words, tones—
unfolding the Sun's petals open.

It's all laughter.

We explore
The riverbanks as children
You may call it scattered nonsense but
The water's life obliges
movement.

In the landscape
our shallow murmurs dance.

The river grows from the rinsing of hands;
The storm falling off their fingertips,
rising waters,
and forming a lake.

The First Lake:

Green like the glaciers that reflect spring trees.
The blue algae that bloomed was the first to learn how to dream.
Dreaming of what could be felt above water.

As fish evolved, they learned: swimming to the bottom
there's food—blue algae—upon the stones.

Once swallowed
the dreams of algae become Truth
by the fish who dare to swim to the surface
and get pulled by their lips
from those once known as the River People.
The fish, and algae dreams then discover what is above.

Above the surface:
We learned what to call ourselves.

SCENES FROM THE ORANGE LINE

what a time to be alive
 it's momentarily february
 the colours are aloof you said
 the roof is giving out & in
 side
 cars
 the daily blizzard
 of immolated narcotics
 claims another so what

what a time to be alive
 the air is heavy like a feather
 a father (rather) & a single mother
 holds a bilingual handmade sign it reads
 badly
quelque chose feed three *something* sons
 here even hunger speaks two languages
 or more one can even feel oddly at home
 here

the scene reminds me of reminiscences
 of a journey to lithuania by jonas mekas
 & the passage on simultaneously being
 there & (almost) completely
 somewhere else in a place you don't recognize
 or belong to but that you still call & feel that word:
 home (this eternal recurrence of departures
 comings & becomings)
 in that space *meaning*
 "the air inside the half-loop of shoelaces half-undone"
 we share this instant understanding or *intimacy*

if you will that what we're waiting for will never come
home this particular partition of untold pain
& predictable oh so predictable confusing thoughts
& endings
so we momentarily march

THE FERRYMAN WEARS DENIM PANTS

The ferryman wears denim pants. The hems are frayed, their cotton tendrils soaking up the salty slush pooling along the banks of the pocked asphalt river of the dead.

The ferryman unloads his cargo, then inspects the paperwork. He glides his thumb above the dotted line. His name, in flawless Phoenician, glints in turquoise on the page.

The ferryman thinks about other things, how his jeans, freezing, feel against the chapped skin of his thighs, or what he'll have for lunch after the rounds are done. They're never done.

The ferryman mutters to nobody, "You'd think this'd be easier to do at some point or other." He does not cry much anymore. He's mostly tired. And sore.

BUZZ BUZZ

Felix Benson

As the day broke, I opened my eyes in relief. It had been a long night, a night of tossing and turning, until I was gratefully saved by an early summer dawn. The light trickled into my bedroom. It soothed my sweat beaded forehead and illuminated my eyelids. Following suit of the sun, a sheepish morning breeze had crept in through the window cracks. Outside, in the bushes, I sensed a density of insects. Coils of snakes and lizards were stretching out their structures, and birds were laughing above somewhere. Each humble voice of this paradise was calling, merging with the faint wind into a susurrus of natural delight that beckoned me back to sleep.

And to sleep I would have had a large DONG, DONG not disturbed my Eden. The local church was chiming its morning bell, crude and insistent. Languid, I decided to begin my day by stretching out a couple limbs and sitting myself on the bed edge with both feet rooted into the tiled earth. Staring at the wall ahead, I felt the urge again to fall asleep and was on the brink of complying, when a sprightly gust of cold air hit my naked body. Now this frosty gust should have been received well had it not left a slight tingling feeling at a pinpoint on my leg.

Strange, I thought, and still under the influence of a fatigued mind I reached down to inspect the blemish, tracing my leg with a tired and clumsy finger. *There!* Hidden at the trough between my hamstring and calf was a small sensitive mound. *So inconspicuous, so insignificant*—and yet, upon touching it, my leg spasmed in ecstasy. I peered down at the cause again and realised that a bastard mosquito had banqueted on me. *Better not agitate it*, I thought. So instead of provocation I opted to do as my mother had always told me to: I

ignored it and rose out of bed on a pair of magnanimous legs. Now it is important to note that, every morning, I will take myself to the mirror and gaze at the progress of my facial stubble. Today was no exception to this routine, and so there I stood, appreciating the overnight addition of two little follicles on my left cheek. Frustratingly, my hirsute pride was cut short for the pesky mosquito bite began to nag at me again, pleading for a little scratch. And the more I delayed attention, the greater the urge grew. It lay in my mental chamber, festering, breeding and tempting me in a slithering mass.

I tried to ignore it. I even walked away from the mirror to the window. I gazed outside at a pretty scene of rolling hills, lined with poplars and orange trees, and nice little robins around, but the bite was just so assertive. It dragged at my mental coattails like a child does to its parent when eager to go on a rollercoaster. *Pleeeaaase scratch me*, it seemed to be saying. And finally, because of my weak resolve with destructive pleasures, I complied with its calling. In front of the beautiful view outside, I began to scratch. And did ecstasy return! Spasms rushed through my nerves, exciting in my brain a festival of pleasure. But here's where the tragedy began. After a good minute-long itch, some of the euphoria absolved into pain, and the longer I scratched, the greater the transmutation. I was soon raking at my skin in a frenzy, succumbing to the opium sweetness of the bite which then punished me with quite severe pain. The blemish possessed me, and before long, I pierced my poor supple skin and unleashed some scarlet drops.

The levee was broken; I was consumed. I tore away as the pain increased and the pleasure dissolved, scratching and raking until the former pinpoint had expanded into a large fleshy crater. A dirty red mark born from the hunger of an ugly speck and moulded by my mortal impatience. *Such self-inflicted gore!* I could bear no more and grabbed at my hand to stop it scratching. The feral beast writhed for a

while in my wrist, eager to escape and get back to its hunt, but eventually—after much persuading—it subsided. Panting, I lay back on the bed, a humid mess, trying to block out the bite that had seared my mind. After several deep breaths my anger wilted; I had decided not to let the pesky creature get the better of me. And, after my hand, and my anger had calmed down, my heart was next.

Looking down, I noticed with disgust that the stream of crimson was being replaced by steady flowing lymph, leaking out of my body. In its sticky sallowness, it looked like tree sap. And just as tree sap reminds a lumberjack of his victim's vitality, the appearance of lymph brought a sense of guilt. My poor body was repairing what my mind sought to destroy.

I cursed myself and rose out of bed in a sweaty mess. The promise of a lovely day ruined by an unshakable guilt and a hatred for insects. I walked outside and stretched my limbs. Clouds covered the promise of sun, trucks moaned along the valley path below; the air felt muggy. While grimacing at the stained view ahead, I heard a faint slapping sound hitting the tiled floor. Looking down, I saw a small robin lying in anguish by the bushes. It had been bitten by a snake and was flapping its wings helplessly. Below pleading eyes, its beak was raised up to me, screeching silently out of fatigue. *Poor thing, all consumed by poison.*

It was about to rain, so I turned back inside to cook some eggs.

I should want more
I should take the hurt

Let every bone shuffle down
to make room for another

I'll show you my open mouth
if you show me yours

The hole in your gums where a tooth used to be
Flesh and blood puddle

How good were the drugs?
Who held you?
How long?

Show me the shards they missed
Bone, but rootless
Bone, but easy

tongue one loose
and let me hold it in my hand.

NAKED IN THE WINDOW

the setting sun will crush
your nudity against the glass
like a foot on the sands of your body
disinterred like a sound in a library

my hot blood is rubbing down the winter
and puddles are crying for the cold
getting hard on the wind's finger
obedience begging for a master

A COSMOS LAID OUT LIKE PERFECT WALLPAPER,
NO BUBBLES

up close a small rip, not a flaw but the limit
between two smaller, more perfect wallpapers,
and here a tear, just a hairline, the careful
splintered boundary between yet more walls
(and who's to say where a wall really begins?),
and in the corner a folding-over, a misalignment,
not a flaw but proof of an underlying structural
complication, unrelated to the perfect process
by which the wall was papered, the skill of the
labourer or the slightest tremble in his hands,
and here perhaps an infinitesimal fracture,
not a flaw but a margin framing the unbelievable
perfection of ever smaller walls, smaller papers,
each one flawless, its own pure perfect
bubble

THE TROW BAIRN

Jacob Gur

Anyone at all familiar with Mother and Father would have sworn that there wasn't a better couple in the whole of Orkney the old trow-face could have picked to inflict me upon. The trow is my real parent. That's how the ruse works—a trow deprives an unsuspecting cradle of its original robust occupant to fill it with its own sickly heir instead. Keenly aware of the danger, all Mother's women-kin took turns at the round-the-clock vigil by the cradle, never taking an eye away from it. At some point, though, every single eye must have been closed in a refreshing slumber because, well, there I was. When Teacher first read us this story at school, I was daft enough to ask what trows do with human babies—bring them up as their own, eat them? Teacher only shrugged with annoyance.

An impenetrable blanket of darkness covers the world on such nights, and snowstorms howl away. At least, this is what I've gathered from Grandmother's and her friends' hushed sighs and my classmates' whispered giggles. The best I could have gotten in terms of background noises, though, was a gentle summer storm whimpering like a pup with a toothache. I was born in June.

I had once asked Mother what sort of night it was when she had discovered the substitute. She threatened me with a hearty whacking if ever I brought up the subject again. "Get this ruddy mince out of yer head once and for all, Mawnis. Yer a child of ours, same as yer brother and sisters. Though, bless me, the one who really deserves a whacking of a lifetime—nay, strangling—is the infernal nugget who put this mince into yer head."

There had been no *one* infernal nugget. A good half of Orkney has been buzzing with it for as long as I could remember, and some of my classmates even took to calling me a trow bairn to my face. True, Teacher had rapped their knuckles. Not that she didn't believe it herself, but she didn't want the rumors to swell into family feuds. The banished word retreated into corridor whispers that rustled like autumn leaves.

The legends got it wrong in my case. Mother and Father never beat me, nor shoveled off all the meanest and nastiest chores onto me. Which was almost worse. Mother sheltered me from most such tasks, forever fussing over my frailness. When listening to her singing in the cowshed and my siblings' merry laughter as they helped her, I'd gladly have expired there and then if only I were allowed to join in. Except that... I *wouldn't* have expired. Despite looking withered in my skin and half the size of my brother who was two years younger than me, I could lift him as easily as if he were a week-old pup.

Only when all my brother and sisters were down with a cold for days in a row, robust noses stuffed up and robust throats aching (this was another of my weird trow bairn gifts—I never went down with a cold), did Mother let me help her in the cowshed. But there was no singing from her and no laughing from me on these occasions. An uneasy strain hung over her busy hands squeezing the udders. Even the cows' hides quivered nervously. The milk tasted sour on such days.

Once, in the school toilet, I overheard Dwain describing to Groat how his distant cousin surprised a trow nestled in the chair by the fireplace. Heart banging wildly, the cousin lay in the silent night, straining his ears for the sound of creeping footsteps. Then, having done some of the creeping of his own, he trapped the trow with his gaze. If dumb enough to make eye contact with a human, Dwain explained, trows are unable to break it until the human breaks it first. Only when the trow heated tongs in the fireplace and threatened to put the cousin's eyes out did he look away.

As a really wee bairn, I had pictured a trow as a short, soapy creature with a large head like those in the children's books. When this stranger mounted her bulwand, a horse made of enchanted dock leaves, I would leap behind her (or him), clasp my real mother (or father) tight, and we'd let the night swallow us. This phrase wrapped up all the tales about trows— "and the night swallowed them." As I got older, I started to wonder whether trows might, as Grandmother believed, indeed be draugrs, the sinister undead spirits. When lying wide awake on the nights after Father had taken everyone except me fishing ("You don't want to catch a cold, Mawnis, dear") and listening to everyone's breathing, I tried to conjure up flames in which everyone, including me, would perish. I was convinced then that I was a true offspring of draugr parents.

I bumped into Dwain and Groat as we rushed to the classroom.

"What's up with you? You look a bit... trowie," said Dwain.

Groat nudged him, and Dwain let out a nervous giggle. Not even Teacher could rap him for that, for 'trowie' simply meant 'pale,' 'sickly.'

•

One night, in the nursery, my heart did its fair share of wild banging like a grandfather clock gone screwy.

"It's a trow," Beatrice, my youngest sister, squeaked as we all lay listening to the noise in the living room.

"It *may* be burglars," came Lorna's shaking voice, aiming at a soothing tone.

"Burglars my left nostril," Alistair snapped. "It's an old trow, alright. And it's plain as day it's here to—"

"Mother will tear out your tongue if she hears you," Lorna cut him off sharply with a quick glance in my direction.

"She can't hear me now, and, anyway, we all know why our living room is alive with trows."

We did all know, me more than anyone. My heart light with hope and heavy with dread all at the same time, I was up on my feet and charging towards the living room, with only Lorna's frantic hiss to follow me.

"Mawnis, you nut, I didn't mean it," Alistair squawked. "It'll take your eyes out if you startle it."

I adjusted my pace at the last moment and tiptoed into the living room, holding my breath. The yellow light of the fireplace revealed a person about my height and build, reaching out a hand towards the shelf which held, among other things, my silver christening cup. Startled, the person turned around to face me, turning out to be so profoundly prosaic and unmythical that my heart somersaulted with disappointment.

This old woman before me—or this old man, you could never really tell with these withered, weather-beaten centenarians—could have been one of Grandmother's yawn-boring friends. In fact, she *was* one of Grandmother's friends, the one who smoked too much and was trailed everywhere by kittens. Or was she?

I blinked and squinted to make sure. One heavily wrinkled Orkadian face with a mane of dirty-white hair was practically identical to any other similarly wrinkled Orkadian face with a similar mane. But that friend of Grandmother's couldn't possibly have made it all the way to our house in a snowstorm. She wouldn't have lasted in that hurricane any longer than any of her kittens would in a dogfight. At any rate, even if she'd gone mad and decided to take a shot at it, she'd be wearing a sturdy coat. All this woman had on was a light, fancy beige jacket with a gold watch hanging out of the pocket on a chain and a splash of

blinding red from the waist down. It looked like Lowland tartan, but I always mix them up.

As her bleak, pale-blue eyes met mine, I noticed that my gaze froze her to the spot. Thousands of tiny needles pierced me all over at this final confirmation of what stood before me. My eyes began to strain from the struggle to hold her, but, luckily, they were in no other danger because she was nowhere near the fireplace.

"Are you... my mother?" I croaked.

"I have the pleasure of being nothing of that description. Now look away and let me get a move on. I haven't got all night," the creature replied in a rasping voice, much deeper than anything Grandmother's friend could have been capable of, even with the sorest of throats.

"My father, then?"

Both his nondescript eyebrows flew up. "I'm no kin of yours, boy. Whoever has put this mince into your head?"

"The whole of Orkney is calling me a trow bairn," I shot back. "Even if you aren't my parent yourself, one of your kind surely is."

"Trow bairn," he said in a meditative sing-song voice. "How you locals love this concept. And no wonder, it being so convenient. But, see, even your ancestors the Vikings couldn't help having skeletons in their cupboards, a great-uncle or two tucked away somewhere, whose runt blood keeps popping up down the generations once in a while. Once too often," he let out a snort packed to the brim with scorn. "We wouldn't touch your beastly human babies with a ten-foot pole if you paid us. Cows, yes. But you we need about as much as fish need a bow and arrow. See, your mother really is your mother. Ditto, your father is the man who has been claiming to be such all along."

"Then why are you here?" I whispered. "I thought you had come to take a peek at me."

He would have rolled his eyes had he been able to break eye contact with me. Instead, there was an eye-roll quiver in his every wrinkle. I dropped my gaze, mortified. Quick as a wink, he grabbed my christening cup, and the door slammed behind him.

I didn't peer out of the window to see whether the stranger would bend double, his purely symbolic natty clothes no protection from the merciless buffets of the snowstorm, or whether he would simply dissolve into the night. I didn't care.

The night might have swallowed him, but my siblings would never swallow the tale about how, not having found anyone in the living room, I simply stood talking to myself. I'd have to tell them what happened. The bitterest tears I'd ever cried ran sideways into my mouth. I stared dumbly at the closed door, trying to figure out what I dreaded most—that they wouldn't believe the stranger's story, or that they would.

ROOTING ECHOES

I turn to my mom to tell her,
“My ankles have begun to argue with the mud and roots.”
The path takes this as an invitation,
revealing small jokes about how little we look
like people who know where they are going.
I still follow Mom’s lead,
because she’s always known how to tell time
on an analog clock, something I’ve yet to learn.

My mother’s laughter catches in the cedar branchlets,
hanging there, wobbling.
I look to her, waiting for a smile
that says, “it’s okay to go fetch it back.”
But the branch shakes its head, murmuring
something about “letting things echo properly.”

So, I listen.
And you, Mom, listen to me
listening to the seconds, tracing the roots.

FIRE

For Mrs. Blake

I hated our Grade One primer:
Fun with Dick and Jane.
Tedious. Slim.

I was only six years old,
but wanted thick books
with no pictures: the real thing.
None of this *See Spot Run.*

Mrs. Blake, my teacher,
saw the fire in me,
fed it until it blazed
with blue flame:

words on flashcards,
blackboards,
hallowed trips to the library.

If there's no vowel, it's not a word.
With her, I parsed
every syllabic rule.
Two vowels make one sound.

I was convinced
she lived in our brick school
building, devoted priestess
of all those books.

Turns out, she lived in the upper storey
of a highly flammable wooden house.
She who knew everything,
how could she not know

fire climbs.
Smoke smothers.

Even now, fifty years later,
I want to save her,
send this poem into her burning house,
set her free.

Run, Mrs. Blake.
Run. Run. Run.

MY CAVE, MY GARDEN

Sugar is not a vegetable but I grow it all the same. From the trembling stalagmites huddled in my cave. The sun has no power down below, instead: sugar crystals glow. I am no chef; I am a gluttonous mole, stuck under tons of stone. I curl around my guilty stomach and it growls and squeaks and groans. Sugar will sustain me.

Sugar is not a vegetable but I prepare it all the same. Plucked straight from the dirt, with my teeth and my shame. I smell it melt in my palms, unbothered by the grime. Unlike vegetables, sugar does not judge me; it is kind.

Sugar is not a vegetable but I eat it all the same. A rudimentary meal for the failed. Every dish I know is sweet: sugar potatoes, sugar turnips, sugar beets.

In my cave the stalactite stars drip drop after drop. Rainwater leaks in from ceiling rock — above ground breathe all the fields and valleys I cannot find — because I tend to my garden. Blind.

I wonder how the pressure of dirt has not yet crushed me, crushed me the way I crush my sugar into a failure's crutch, and feast face first.

BLOCKADE

They gathered at the logging road's midpoint,
their hand-painted signs and hot tempers decorating the sky

like carved comets. When a teal length of plastic piping arrived,
the frozen earth's belly swelling wretchedly, the protectors

spanned the frigid path with their bodies. The stolid man in
his greasy machine choked on their impassioned devotion,

had to shield himself from the unbridled force of their fury.
With bare heads bowed and spirits daunted, the workers took

their tubes and left, leaving the earth unblemished, the oak's
roots clear of tar and black viscousness. Nature warms her

wintery limbs with a procession of reimagined recollections; a people-
powered reseizure in Fairy Creek; foiled fairways, planned for
the People of the Flint; the Sound still holding onto her stands

of cedars. These ancient meadows, smiling with the bloom of
the blue tulip, echoing with the cheery ode of the warbling wren.

These soils, rich with remnants of resistance.

MISS YOU IN THE PRAIRIES

Valerie Page

When Toronto had disappeared in the rearview mirror, Sabrina began to feel that the drive to Saskatoon would demand more patience than she possessed. She sat in the passenger seat of Will's beaten-up 2003 Chevy, her eyes glued to the outside, trying to look anywhere but the digital clock lit on the dash, counting down the hours until their arrival. Instead, she watched the light cloud cover, the soft white strips in the sky drifting along to the music playing from the car's CD player.

When Will had first brought up the idea of spending the summer at his family home, fear bloomed in her chest. She had tried to make an excuse; *I'm not a fan of the farm-life, I'm too busy, don't you think it's a bit soon?* But he took her nerves in stride and assured her that his parents would adore her; *we could make a road trip out of it. You'll never see that much of the country any other way.* She reluctantly caved and made the plan, choosing to let it slip her mind. On their third consecutive day on the road, she sat 3,000 kilometres from home, pinned between her partner and the encompassing windows of the old truck. She rolled down the glass and stuck her hand out, feeling the resistance of the wind against her open palm.

They drove along endless country roads, two-lane highways with boundless fields to the left and canola farms to the right. The scenery was vast and shapeless, and it looked to her as if she were passing through an unfinished land, a body without features. She watched the little yellow flowers glow bright—a tangible harvesting of the sun. They smelled pungent, almost sweet, their scent lingering on the wind and blowing softly into the truck.

“As a kid, I hated when the canola came into bloom. Smelled like hot cabbage,” Will said, reaching out to put his hand on her thigh. “But now I’ve grown to like it. Smells like home.”

She turned back to observe the fields and nodded. It was unfamiliar, but she liked it.

“It’s grounding,” she finally replied. He looked over at her and smiled.

“Anyway, the drive shouldn’t be much longer; we’re a little over an hour out. You’re not feeling too nervous anymore?”

“I guess not,” she shrugged.

“Sab, we’ve been over this. You have nothing to worry about.” He squeezed her leg. “They’re my parents—they’re just normal people.”

The truck turned down an unpaved side road, dirt flying into the air as the tires dug into the earthen track. A giant billboard stood tall, faded by the climate, with a large cross and lettering across it: “There Is No Greater Love Than Sacrifice.” She bit the inside of her cheek, lumpy and soft, until a bitter taste lingered on her tongue. Was there not?

She looked away and turned to the clutter that accumulated at her feet. She shifted further into the seat, trying to move away from all the stuff that surrounded her: the bags, the pillows, the wrappers, the coffee cups, the proof of the drive, and the testaments of her love and her sacrifice, willing or not. Suddenly, everything in the truck had grown to smell like the ash, sweat, and mildew from the motels they had slept in the night before, and she worried that the scents had ingrained themselves into the weaves of their clothes. She unbuckled her seatbelt and lifted her feet to the dash.

From below, peaking out of her purse, a small metallic, angel-shaped keychain glistened in the sun. It was rusted and scratched, and only the small, plastic beads still had lustre; a gift she had received from her

parents when she was just a kid. They had said it was a token of protection for when they weren't around, but from a young age, she found out that was always when she needed it the least. When she and Will had stopped at a mom-and-pop gas station in rural Manitoba, he pointed out a cluster of them hanging in the window by the cash register. They glowed like stained glass, and Will said he ought to buy her a new one—that hers was battered and looked like it had finished its job more than a long time ago. She hadn't been fond of his idea. She bent down and zipped the bag closed.

When Will had first mentioned meeting her parents, he had said it half in jest. Something about how he could charm them and how her dad would be happy to have a son-in-law he could put to manual labour. It caught her off guard, a conversation she longed to postpone. She thought that if she never mentioned it, he wouldn't inquire about meeting them. It would simply slip under the radar. At the time, she smiled politely and deflected. *I'm sure he would.*

“Sab, look, over there. Horses!” he slowed and pointed out.

In the open field that surrounded them, wild horses ran in the distance. Their manes, untamed, flew high in the wind. As they approached the stream that cut through the land, the haze kicked up by their hooves obscured them. They came in a herd, mares and stallions with their foals.

“Can we stop to see them?” she asked.

He looked around and pulled off the road.

“I don't see why not. Doesn't seem like anyone's coming down here.”

They stepped out of the truck, and she brought her hands above her head in a stretch. She had begun to grow claustrophobic, but after stepping out of her seat, she felt infinitely smaller. She looked over at

Will, who took up space against the open plane, and they stood silently for a moment, separated by a border created by the clouds and the sun.

“C’mon, follow me.” He reached out and grabbed her hand, leading her across the dirt road. “We can’t get too close to them, but we can watch from around here.”

He led her into the tall, yellowed grass where they stood to watch the horses.

“They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” he said, looking over at her.

“Yeah, they are. I’ve never been this close to one.”

She dropped his hand and sat down. She could picture Will growing up here. He still appeared like the boy she saw in his childhood photos, standing in his grass-stained overalls, especially as she looked up at him now against the pale blue sky. In his apartment, he had photos of his family and the Prairies haphazardly hung on the walls and placed on countertops. At times, she thought he felt unsatisfied in the city. When she first went to his place, she would sneak passing glances at them, and she tried to reconstruct a timeline, creating a narrative of what his life was once like. Thin layers of dust collected on some frames, while others displayed faded colours from age. It bothered her how little he seemed to acknowledge them. She envied the photographs and wondered if he noticed that she didn’t have many of her own.

She turned back to the horses and locked eyes with a foal, its gaze unwavering. A large brown spot covered one of its eyes, a dark impression against its white coat. The foal distanced itself from the group, moving towards her until its front hooves sank into the stream. She curiously leaned forward, anticipating its next move. She felt there was something important to tell her—some secret—that even a creature born wild could feel captive and need to withdraw. She moved her eyes and scanned its body, and it let out a shallow breath, turning

from her. It trotted over to join its mother, who lay further down the stream, and nuzzled its head against her hind leg. From the side, the foal was untainted, its fur a soft reflection of the clouds overhead. It bent down into the grass beside the mare, its body disappearing between the tall blades. Her illusion faded, and she pulled away to look back at Will, who sank beside her.

“The sky is pretty crazy out here. You can see so much of it; it’s almost like you can see the curve of the earth,” she said.

“This is Saskatchewan, haven't you heard? It’s the land of the living skies.”

She rolled her head toward him, smiling, and he lay down, gesturing for her to follow.

“My mother used to say the sky could feel, just like us. When it thundered, it was angry. When it was sunny, happy, cloudy was neutral,” he said.

“What about when it would snow?”

“Ah, that I don’t know. I guess it would be the same principle as rain. That’s a good question, though; you should ask her.”

She laughed, paused, then reached over to place her hand on his knee. She was briefly struck with a sting of pain.

“Does it bother you that you won’t meet my parents?” she asked.

“No, why would it?”

She rolled her spine back and lay in his open arm. She sighed heavily and let herself sink into the ground, the grass moulding to her body as she moved.

“I don’t know. It kind of bothers me.”

“It shouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not your fault.”

“I know.” She closed her eyes and shifted her jaw. She had repeatedly tried to convince herself of the fact, but the words only landed in her mind without taking root. She felt that this was more permanent, and if his parents didn’t like her, it would surely be her fault.

She raised herself to a seated position and looked back at the horses, who were already gazing at them. She fixed her focus on the foal, who quickly dipped its head, almost a nod, its forelock spilling over its face and hiding the birthmark. She unconsciously mirrored the gesture, and the animal turned to follow its herd, which trotted away and eventually faded back into the scenery.

Sabrina shifted to look down at the grass, where there was a body-shaped dent from where she once lay. It slowly began to unfold beneath the pressure, reverting to the state it once held.

“Will, do you mind if we stay here just a little while?”

“Take all the time you need.”

WEB CONTENT

S.A.S (SEPARATED AT SEA)

Coralie Olivier

The chicken scratches of the borrowed fountain pen made Charlie's hair stand on end.

I am well, he wrote, but I lost sight of Walt after we jumped into the water. I have not seen him since. Today, I will go to the morgue and look for his body.

Once he was done writing, nausea washed over him. Still, he ordered breakfast and the waiter crossed the quiet dining room, zigzagging between other bereaved guests to get him a cup of coffee.

Charlie and Walt had always been inseparable. They were the only two boys stuck between an old sister and two younger ones. Though born two years apart, their mother called them her twins. Charlie had delayed his entrance to Cambridge so he and Walter could start attending together. After graduation, they'd taken a trip to the North American continent together. It had been a nice trip, and so after six months, they had been satisfied with their journey and ready to go home. If only their ocean liner hadn't been struck by another one.

Charlie's hand shook as he brought the coffee cup to his lips. A few drops of the hot, dark liquid slipped over the rim and dripped onto his letter. He let out a shaky sigh. Setting the cup back in its saucer, he crumpled the letter and asked for another piece of paper. His fingers drummed on the table as he waited. His gaze bore into the scone in front of him. The blank paper, with the hotel's crest at the top, was gently placed in front of him, and he grabbed the fountain pen once more. His hand was shaking. He took a deep, steadying breath, and his father's words echoed in his mind. *A gentleman must remain composed under pressure.*

He scribbled the same short letter without thinking, his hand moving as if the words had been engraved under his skin. It was only as he signed that he realized he was done, though his penmanship was barely legible. As he was eager to be done with the task, he folded the paper, pressing his finger over every fold to secure it. Then, he put the letter in the envelope, and wrote his home address. The RMS London had sunk off the Irish coast. If he posted the letter this morning, the news would arrive before he did, especially if he had to make arrangements for Walt's body.

Though he stared at the scone in front of him, Charlie found that he had no appetite. He looked at the grandfather clock in the dining room. The makeshift morgue didn't open for another hour, but he had nothing better to do. He picked up his letter and left the dining room.

All in all, their return trip had been a pleasant journey, up until the crash. Barely a day before, Charlie and Walt had been in the smoking lounge when they'd felt the crash. Like many, they'd rushed to the promenade deck to see what had happened. Through the thick fog, they could only make out lights and screams. The ship had listed to starboard so abruptly that Charlie had lost his footing. He might have hurt himself if Walt hadn't held him back.

The brothers hadn't tried to get into a lifeboat. As gentlemen, they respected the rule; they had to give their chance to the women and children first. They were strong swimmers, especially Walt. Charlie had faith that they would stay afloat until rescue arrived. They hadn't even had to jump. Once the ship's bow had been fully immersed into the water, the stern had followed. All the brothers had to do was step into the cold water. But the moment the ship had been submerged, it'd sucked them down with it. Charlie had thrashed senselessly, his life jacket useless. His lungs had tightened like fists, begging for air.

Somehow, he'd emerged. Though the fog had been lifting, he'd been unable to spot Walt beside him. He'd called his name. His voice had been drowned in the ruckus of cries screaming for help, for loved ones' names, in agony and terrified. The current had tussled him; the cold waves had crashed over him. He couldn't spot Walt. As soon as he'd spotted a folding chair which had fallen off the promenade deck, he'd swam to it and held on for dear life.

It was only later, as he'd floated in the water, that he'd realized the other ship had gone down too. A couple of lifeboats with a red hull had been huddled nearby, not black like the ones on the London. As soon as the fog had lifted, he'd seen the graying edge of Ireland beyond the choppy waves. It had become a bright, beautiful, cloudless day. Surely rescue would come swiftly.

It had taken them three painful, frigid hours.



The hotel clerk had taken his letter, to be posted with all the other ones. Charlie caught a glimpse of the bag and saw it was close to full. With nothing better to do, Charlie walked to the morgue. It wasn't a morgue, but the town's brick and metal-framed covered market. There should have been fruits and fresh fish for sale that day, but the only things pulled out of the water that morning had been bodies and debris.

Charlie wasn't alone outside the market. Though the morgue wasn't yet open, the front door was crowded with survivors, waiting to be let within. Charlie stepped in line. In front of him was a man holding a toddler, the child's face hidden in the collar of their father's jacket. Not a minute had passed before someone stepped in line behind him, a young woman who reminded him of his youngest sister. She'd made an effort to appear put together by pinning up her hair but the red rimming her eyes betrayed her.

Charlie hadn't cried. It would be unbecoming of him. The tightness in his throat wasn't tears, but hours of calling Walt's name had given him a sore. If his brother had been alive, he would have heard him. Maybe it hadn't quite sunk in yet that his brother was gone. Perhaps it wouldn't until he saw body laid out on the ground, still wearing his wire-framed glasses and cardigan. Perhaps then, Charlie would stop holding out on hope that maybe, just maybe, Walt had made it out.

One by one, the survivors were let inside. The market stank of brine. The smell had been so strong as he floated for rescue that Charlie had stopped smelling it long before he had spotted the first fishing ships sent to their aid. Now it slapped him across the cheek like a cold wave. A board had been set against the wall near the entrance, with the lists of all the passengers from both ships. Charlie stood at the back of the small crowd gathered there, his eyes lost on the hundreds of lines over dozens of sheets of paper, all pinned a little askew on the wood panel. His eyes stopped on one paper. Half of the names on the list had already been crossed out, indicating survivors.

Charlie decided not to waste another second on the lists. He proceeded to the viewing room. All the lights above burned to their fullest. Five rows had been made with the dead bodies. They seemed an enormous display of sleeping people. There was no order to where each body had been placed, aside from the order in which they had been fished out.

In the first alley, a couple was embracing as the woman choked on sobs in the man's arm. At their feet was the body of a girl. Head jerking up, Charlie brushed past them, took two steps forward, then stopped. He suddenly remembered that he was supposed to look down. If he didn't look down, he wouldn't be able to see whether it was his brother or not. The earth seemed to slip from under his feet, unsettling

him. He had to look. That was why he'd come. He looked at the body beside him. It was the body of an old, whiskered man. He exhaled. Another step, and he was in front of a woman, half of her hair still secured by ivory pins.

By the end of the first line, Charlie had grown numb. His eyes felt disconnected from his brain. He saw without seeing, walked past men, women, and children until they didn't look real anymore. There was no sign of Walter.

Charlie was torn between hope and despair. Only the firmest grip on his emotions allowed him to push through. Still, doubt swirled in his mind. What if Walt's body had been sucked into the ship's trail, and sank, and would never resurface?

He walked past a nurse who interrupted his search. His ears were ringing. A confused fog had settled over his mind. After staring at her long enough, he understood that she'd asked him if he needed help. He told her no, as politely as he could, not now, and kept walking.

His gaze stopped on another body. A young man. Cold terror gripped his heart. The man didn't have glasses on. What did Walter look like without his glasses? Charlie saw him every evening and every morning without them. Why couldn't he remember? What did Walt look like?

A familiar voice cut through the fog of Charlie's mind:

"Can you help me? I'm looking for my brother. I couldn't see his name on any of your lists. He has black hair like mine and... er... a little scar over his temple from when he ran into a table."

He stepped away from the stranger's body, and turned back toward the nurse. Another young man was talking to her, leaning over the clipboard in her hand.

"Can you search for his name? Charles Burns."

"Walt?"

The young man looked up upon hearing his name. This was what Walter looked like. He still had his glasses, though one of the lenses was snapped in half and would need fixing. His eyes grew wide when he spotted Charlie. They ran toward each other and crashed into a hug.

Charlie cried. He couldn't hold back his tears as relief, warm like an angel's kiss, washed over him. Walt held him fiercely.

"How?" he asked. "I couldn't see you after we got sucked in, I thought..."

"Me too."

Though they parted to look into each other's face, they held firmly onto one another still. Walt's grasp on his brother's arm would leave a bruise, but it was a bruise Charlie was happy to mend.

"I called your name for so long..."

"Me too," Walt replied.

"What happened?"

"I swam to one of the lifeboats and they helped me in. You?"

Charlie sniffed and brushed the tears out of his eyes with the back of his sleeve. Walt had to remove his glasses to do the same.

“I grabbed onto a chair. I don’t understand. Why didn’t I see you when they brought us back to shore?”

“Our boat drifted away. It took a while before they caught up to us. They must have gotten you out of the water first, and thank God they did.”

Charlie pulled his brother into another hug. He welcomed the awe and disbelief he felt. When they parted, he told him:

“Come on, we don’t need to stay here.”

They left behind the sorrow and anguish of the makeshift morgue. Charlie kept one arm wrapped around his brother and promised himself that, for as long as he lived, he wouldn’t let him out of his sight again.

“I’m at the hotel by the harbor, up that way,” Walt indicated.

“They set me up at the Astoria.”

“Of course,” his brother chuckled. “You’d get the fancy hotel. In that case, I am changing rooms. I hope you have a second bed or we’ll have to share.”

“I don’t know if we’ll spend the night here,” Charlie pondered. “I figured we would see about getting home as soon as possible.”

Charlie let out a gasp when he remembered the letter he’d just to his father.

“Oh no... I wrote to father this morning. I told him that I would be looking for your body today.”

To Charlie’s surprise, Walt burst out laughing.

“Brother, I wrote him the exact same thing.”

Charlie laughed too. Their laughter could be heard up and down the street, like the song of two summer birds.

“Hopefully he receives the letters together.”

A CONUNDRUM, A VENT ... JABBERWOCKY? THIS
IS THE UNIVERSITY GRADUATION HOME
STRETCH.

Saskia Wodarczak

Ladies and gentlemen, I am in crisis. Well, maybe not a crisis, but certainly quite a conundrum. I have waited five years to graduate university. I've vented to friends, family, the rabbits at Jericho Beach in Vancouver, yet as graduation creeps closer and closer like Gollum in *Lord of the Rings*, I find myself at a loss.

What if I don't get a job? I feel more ghosted than I ever have, including that brief period a couple years ago when I thought dating apps were a good idea (that was the worst idea I've ever had in my entire life and I do not wish those apps upon *anyone*).

In a country where the job market is already intimidating, being fresh out of university (or, in my current case, in that brutal final semester where the only thing on my mind is applying for jobs and making sure I have enough money to purchase groceries), is daunting. While my mind can't thoroughly process this, I can certainly write about it.

So thus, I am venting to you, the reader – I am sure the above mentioned audiences have heard enough out of me.

Yes, even the rabbits.

Especially the rabbits.

You are now my new audience.

I hope to pursue a career in publishing, which, should I wish to remain in Canada, will likely be in Toronto – which is fine by me. This career

path sparked my interest when I watched *The Proposal* for the first time. I mean, who wouldn't want to be Margaret Tate (or Sandra Bullock, for that matter), working at the top of the ladder in publishing, wearing those beautifully tailored outfits and heels? That, along with being the friend who edited people's essays, when their request was to only *read* it, morphed into the dream career that I am so very keen on. While Ontario itself is quite flat (which, for someone from B.C., was a shock when I first moved there), I have recently found myself daydreaming of Roncesvalles and my favourite latte at a coffee shop there. My largest network of friends is in Ontario. Oh, what I wouldn't give for pasta at Vivoli celebrating various birthdays with my friends in Toronto...

And then, as I stare at a blank page on which I am to write my character persona for my English class, I think about how much I wish I could've pursued optometry like I had originally planned. It's just that math, science and I? We aren't the best of friends. Don't get me wrong, I loved biology class. I adored dissecting that preserved cow's eye in my grade 8 science class with Mme Yang. I loved seeing how pearly and iridescently blue the cornea of that eye was, and carefully, methodically labelling each part of the eye: the sclera, ciliary body, the retina, to name a few. It was fun to watch one of the girls in the class chase one of the guys around the classroom threatening to douse him with what remained of the conjunctiva and the Vitreous body.

Hell, I copiously studied the various functions of the parts of the eye throughout the summer. I went to university fairs to determine where I could do my undergrad in order to pursue optometry. However, grade 11 physics arrived and I realized that I wasn't cut out for the sciences. Grade 11 chemistry further proved this, even though I had such a lovely teacher, Ms. Asmani, who tirelessly walked me through Avogadro's number and chemical bonds more times than I'd care to admit. Maths and Sciences simply are not for me.

I could go on forever about this – these thoughts that have been plaguing my mind – however, to tie a lovely bow on this article, I will simply say this more so as an affirmation to myself: I believe I am well-equipped for the career I hope to pursue. I sit here, at ten thirty at night on February 6, 2026, feeling this fugue take minor shape as I write it. Maybe I ought to have pursued piano... I was quite good at the piano.

Nevertheless, I am sure there will always be a small part of me that, as much as I look forward to editing manuscripts with my red pen, dreams of having my own white coat like the one my optometrist in Vancouver has.

Oh well. Graduation is in June, and I need to go apply for more jobs.

BURNT OR BLUSH?

Cate Murphy

Summer is my favorite time of year.

It's the only season that seems to give permission for idleness, and not the guilty kind either. Laying flat on the grass or stretched out on a faded beach towel, paperback in hand, hours bleeding into each other, it feels not only acceptable but righteous. If you're outside, the logic goes, you're doing something, even if that something is absolutely nothing. There's also the freedom of abandoning little routines you thought you couldn't live without. For me, the endless rotation of foundation, concealer, bronzer—all gone. Instead, the sun does the work. A few hours in the daylight, and your skin glows with an organic blush, as if the rays are complicit in your vanity. Even hair, unruly and damp looks intentional in the summer. Everything softens. You are softer, too. Moods lift. Days stretch longer, into a light that never dims. Life itself feels lighter, as if burdens melt under the heat. Summer, more than any other season, carries the charge of rebirth. But it's a fragile one, already decaying by the time it begins.

Last summer, my rebirth wasn't solitary—it was tethered to someone else. A person who became the entire framework of those months, so much so that when I recall the season, I can't remember myself apart from them. The sunlit days, the humid nights, and those lazy afternoons with cicadas whining in the background, each of them is overlaid with the echo of their presence. The story of last summer really begins in June. The days were still finding their heat, not yet oppressive, just promising. I met them at a timid social gathering, one of those parties where no one knows exactly whose birthday it is but everyone drinks like they do. They leaned against the railing, half in shadow, half illuminated by those string lights that never work properly. Conversation came easy. Or maybe it wasn't conversation so much as

the suspension of it. Those long stretches of silence that didn't feel awkward, the kind of pauses that feel like doors opening rather than shutting. I don't remember what we talked about. I only remember the hum of potential, the feeling that something was about to begin.

By July, everything was accelerated. We fell into each other's routines until we had no routines anymore. Mornings blurred into afternoons blurred into nights. We lived in an orbit of parks, coffee shops, and dim apartments with fans rattling in the window. We took endless walks just to be moving, as if the act of being in motion together was the real point. The world shrank to encompass only the two of us. My friends grew accustomed to my absence. My phone buzzed less and less, and I didn't notice. Summer makes it easy to be selfish; everything outside your immediate experience fades into irrelevance. There's something intoxicating about that intensity, the way it convinces you it could never fade. Even as I felt myself slipping deeper into dependence, I didn't mind. It was surrendering to something inevitable, something bigger than the careful boundaries I normally carried.

But inevitability is a trick of the season.

By September, the nights cooled. Our energy frayed. The conversations thinned, the silences grew heavier. The exaggerated selves we had been—reckless, radiant—sputtered in the shorter days. Without the heat, without the light, we were just people again. And that wasn't enough. We didn't fight, there was no dramatic ending, no stormy scene. Just a quiet drifting, like the tide retreating without anyone noticing until the sand is bare. One day, I realized I hadn't spoken to them in weeks. I stopped expecting to. It's strange to think of how central someone can be, only to vanish without residue. But then again, maybe the residue is me, the version of myself that summer carved out. A version I might not see in the mirror come winter, but one that existed, briefly, undeniably.

And yet, by autumn, the tether snapped.

The person disappeared, or I did. It doesn't matter who left first. What matters is that our attachment was absolute, until it wasn't. That is the strangeness of summer: how completely it consumes, yet how cleanly it can vanish. I tried to explain this the other week, walking with an old friend down a tree-lined street where fallen leaves crunched underfoot. I was describing what felt like a double life, the way summer transforms me into a more reckless, more radiant version of myself. My friend tilted her head and laughed. "So basically you're unhinged for three months," she said. I suppose so. But it's more than that. It's not just indulgence or carelessness, it's exaggeration. I'm more likely to say yes to everything, to stay out too late, to spend mornings recovering on balconies with iced coffee sweating in my hand. More likely to attach myself to someone with an intensity that would scare me in December.

There's a reason, I think, that summer flings are clichés. They belong to the season that encourages blurring: of rules, of expectations, of identities. You can slip out of the skin you've been dragging around since January and put on a new one, shimmering, though already peeling at the edges. The person you become is not the everyday version, but rather, the expanded edition, the "feral" side, the one that only exists under a sun that doesn't set until nine.

But then comes autumn. The air sharpens, nights arrive sooner, and suddenly, there's the question: who are you when the season turns? Do you snap back like an elastic band to the winter version of yourself? Or does some trace of the summer self remain, lingering in freckles that fade too slowly? Is there even such a thing as a "true" self? Or are we all seasonal versions, shifting slightly depending on the light, the weather, the company we keep? I've stopped pretending I know the answer, and you should too. I do know this: the end of summer is the best time of all. It's the moment of ambiguity, when skin glows but you

can't tell if it's the soft blush of a brand or the harsh red of a burn. That edge between vitality and damage, between beauty and pain.

When I say "summer is my favorite season," maybe that's what I really mean. Not the weather, not the iced drinks, not even the books devoured in the sun. But the permission it gives to become someone else, to try on another skin, to blur the line between burns and blush. The thing about blush is that it fades. By October, my cheeks were pale again. I bought a branded compact from the drugstore, applied it in the bathroom mirror before meeting friends I hadn't seen all season. They teased me—"back from the dead," they said—and maybe they weren't wrong. But here's the part I didn't admit to them: I missed that summer version of myself. I missed the recklessness, the intensity, the willingness to be consumed. Even if it wasn't sustainable, even if it wasn't healthy, it was alive and it was vivid. Sometimes, when I'm walking home on a cold evening, I catch sight of myself in a shop window and wonder if she's still there, buried under sweaters and routine. Maybe she's waiting for the next June, the next stretch of heat to coax her out. Maybe she's not gone at all—just seasonal, like everything else. And when she does return, I'll know by the same telltale sign: the cheeks flushed by sunlight and the ambiguous glow. Burnt or blush...it's hard to know, until the peeling begins.

CONTRIBUTORS

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