

We're Not Going To Do Better Next Time  
the Samson & Dalila poems

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## Abstract

### *We're Not Going To Do Better Next Time*

Lauren Turner

The poems in *We're Not Going To Do Better Next Time* are anchored around the biblical parable of Samson and Delilah (spelled “Dalila” here). Approaching the story from a secular contemporary perspective, the poems focus on the two characters themselves, rather than the religious elements of the traditional narrative. *We're Not Going To Do Better* explores the dynamics of a flawed relationship and how two people relate (or fail to relate) to one another. Instabilities in the narrative’s consistency reflect Dalila and Samson’s dueling perspectives and the fallibility of memory, as well as how the choices made in a relationship can lead to many possible outcomes. The work falls into four sections: Prequels (to root the work in its source text), Encounters (relaying the relationship’s beginnings and progression), Fallout (how the relationship disintegrates), and Cleanup (the characters’ lives beyond each other). While the individual poems should be able to stand on their own, this collection is intended to be read as a narrative.

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## Dedication

*for Sarah & Lindsey  
with much thanks  
and more love*

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I.

Prequels

## Accuracy

A row of folded cranes, a sharpening stone.  
Origami rendering the wings exact, forgoing the soft mutability of feathers.

Flannel sheets cast *les ombres sur le tapis*. Birds sit obscured by sunlight.

There might be a girl outside,  
one with hair so black, so straight that  
he would confuse it with a scrap of cloth, pupils dilating to re-educate sight.

*La lumière est faible.*

They consume in shadow. Three varieties of *agaricus bisporus*, the crust flecked with basil.

Hands that articulate, hands that mutter and dither.

Align milk crates into bed frames. If they sleep now, the day will be severed by a serrated blade.

A man-made nightfall. *Crépuscule.*



Seven

The stories remember that she held the scissors, those long thin hands  
    in his hair, sweetly  
measuring out the felling blow. While dozing against the folds of her skirt  
    like some cat or child,  
her husband murmurs of how bees nestled in a lion's belly, honey pooling  
    between the rawness of its ribs  
& the dusk that came upon them was bright with olive groves set ablaze  
    by the tails of foxes,  
    his first bride bathed in ash  
& when he reached out to touch her cheek, it fell black into her skull:  
    her lips, still parted, his howl  
pressing against sleep.                      *Stop,*    it is Dalila who answers him.  
    *Do not dream of her, I am here now*  
Bowstrings snap, ropes unfurl, & braids come undone—nothing holds  
    but this, her fingers releasing  
    what they took away

## In memoriam

China confetti on the café floor. She'd lost her mind over a broken cup. Rest of her shift spent dead certain pieces jumped under her lids, now migrating back to make tiny nicks at the optic bundles. Blind her. Life was poised to slip its edge. Lopsided elms. Lowflying pigeons. The talkative elevators. All loom as liabilities. A clean death is fine but she'd die if she became the Next Samson. Muddling about on her knees, shrew-like and alone. She'd seen him. Snuck in a terrace window, flowerbox as leverage. Samson quiet in their bed: his body smaller, bright forearm emerging on white sheets. Ran her fingers over tattooed bicep, a wrath of bees honeying a lion's ribcage. Their curious violences. His eyes, twin squares of rusty gauze. She considers crying and their shared inability for tears. *Go away* Sam whispers or doesn't say at all. Her heart in her ears. Her hand on his face. There isn't ever a goodbye worth saying.

II.

## Encounters

## Faulty introductions

On the 6 o'clock train

she overhears one man say to another, *I used to have the same dream.*

*I was the strongest person on Earth until a woman cut off all my hair.*

It's a good voice. The kind of voice she'd want to read her Hemingway over a tumbler of Still Waters. If she cared for whiskey or for restraint.

Turning in her seat, Dalila asks: *Do you fear female barbers?*

\*

Samson can't decide if she's cold or trying

to make herself look bigger like some perpetually affronted

mongrel: all skinny legs, padded army jacket and boots that long to lay tread to kneecaps.

*Where did you come from?* he says, loud over the clattering metro car.

*You look like a space flamingo. If they were green.*

She sets aside her dog-eared Ondaatje: *You've been watching me*

*since Jean Talon [recrosses her ankles] and that's the best you've got?*

\*

*Want a do-over?* Dalila asks.

One of the regulars has deviated

from his usual allongé with foamed milk

and is looking despairingly at a soy cappuccino.

*Please, Samson hands it back. My girlfriend thinks we should go off dairy.*

*I feel like I'm cheating on her whenever I come here.*

\*

*Are you seeing anyone?*

*You don't get to ask me that* she replies, kissing him to keep their lips away from banality and sun exposure.

\*

*Which ballerina is your girlfriend?* she asks

the man sitting alone with the pile of fur-collared coats. A gold clutch on his knees.

He gestures, bourbon-handed, at a lanky prima blonde fawning over another. *Her pas-de-deux partner* he offers, sans prompting: *Do you think they're sleeping together?*

Dalila says: *Maybe that's a question you can only ask strangers.*

\*

*I don't dance.* They're leaning up against the cool bars of the fire escape, sharing a turquoise cigarillo from his girlfriend's purse.

Dalila, who has perfected smoking without inhaling like a Hollywood starlet, offers a *Me neither* in apology. She'd heard jazz falling from the loft's open window, taken it as an informal invitation.

Samson laughs: *Ah, a pair of wolves amongst the sheep?*

\*

She wanted to be in love. He wouldn't have guessed but the gin made her soft, ready to squeeze out confessions like juice from a lime wedge.

Bar stools are as forsaken as pews. On certain Sundays, everyone looks like a sinner worth knowing.

\*

*I can't dance*, her voice muffled by the cotton candy duvet.  
Samson rolls over onto his side, grins: *You made that pretty clear last night.*

First mornings always feel like this. The trepidation sets in only once you've left the bedroom. Soon, she'll be asking herself if there's somewhere he'd rather be, if they've made a mistake.

*But this didn't feel like a mistake*, whispers Dalila.

*What are you doing under there?* he asks. The mound of blankets shakes its head.

\*

*Do you imagine yourself mysterious?*  
*-I imagine myself bored.*

## In Love (i)

There was intoxication to it at first. A love to be relegated to rooms made dim by smoke and other people's limbs. Those are the exciting places. Where nights go to stagger. Hours drain away with the lowballs. They're pressed close as twinned thieves, magnetic in their newness. He's soft with his hands and *god his neck smells good*. Buoyant in gin, in hunger, she's at the age where she needs it all to kill so delicately. They met on a Sunday. Haven't said a word since to anyone else. Phones left for dead, no sick notes forged to bosses or paramours. A love to repel outward. They cluster in his bedding like a shared lung till dusk air expels them. Mornings spent picking the bones of his cupboards, whiskey in instant coffee. The world, a silhouette on the curtains. Dalila floats her dress in bath water. Wants to wear what he does. Mimics her lilac hair into a topknot and laughs. It's so nice, everything.

*How are you doing out there in the world?*

It started with photos of Montréal skyline, a tired joke  
that when you don't know someone, you talk of the weather.

Dalila didn't like texts. They made her claustrophobic.  
*Don't ask me what I'm doing. Show me what you're looking at.*

His brother gave him hell. They'd be on the terrace  
at Benelux, pints of Black Beatty at their elbows, paninis *et frites*

uneaten, as Sam angled his phone at a purple twilight. *Even for you*  
says the brother, *This is some lovesick bullshit.*

Samson's grin unfazed. He was learning cloud names: cirrus, stratus,  
a mackerel sky. But later on his front stoop, face lit-up

by phone screen, a slow smoke unspooling from his third Marlboro,  
he might brood: *Is it too early to be this invested?*

when a photo appears of disheveled bedding,  
an uninhabited mattress. Dalila's caption of *I can't sleep*

*with anyone else touching me.* Doesn't ask him to come over.



## Palimpsest

Samson spells her discarded name along her arm.  
Traces the *H*, letting it settle there. Does it again.

*I don't think I could call you anything else.*

Dalila jerks away, stabs a blueberry pancake with her fork.

Every one is burnt on one side. It's too deliberate  
and Samson's mind goes to other mysteries, the in-betweens.

*It's not even a different name she argues. Erase two letters,  
write a new one in.*

\*

*Just Delilah*, she'd said then. Family name left behind, what is done  
with the cumbersome.

Similar scene. Sitting at different sides  
of that table, a few drinks between them. Not enough to spill

coarse little truths. What we carry in blood. *Delilah*—

what a thing to give. Named for her mother, her father  
mourning silence, quelled nights with an open palm. Thud-pitched.

*It bothers me, being kept by a word.* When it's said to her, easy  
and forgiving in half-sleep, she answers because she knows it's hers.

\*

*Will you tell me about them?*

She won't set this down  
in his hands.

He says: *It's relevant to us.*

We atone for our lineage  
somehow, we atone.

Name like the dark, peel  
up an edge. Crawl out.

## A guessing game of fists

She'd known that kind of love and how it left her under a stream of burning water, but never enough to be clean. With a nail, she picks off a halo of toothpaste flecks from the mirrored girl. It's her alright. Angular and slippery like mermaids who don't cut it for Disney fables. Consider this. Think of Samson with his hands clenched into two spheres. *Pick one* he's saying. Maybe his love can stay a game to her but there's levity in being so adored. She peeled from earth in a blue *montgolfière* on her fifth birthday. Father gripped her wrists and gravity sunk her belly to her light-up shoes. Each treetop was stitched into one green wool sweater. Like now, she was awed in her terror. So, she'd answered *Left hand* and *show me*. Nestled there: a pawnshop ring, his *will you?*

Newly

1.

She wore a dress and he put a blanket on the grass.  
The park was in Verdun. They'd been married  
a handful of hours.

The blanket was for her.  
There was enough space  
for him but he chose to sit beside its edge.

*Come be closer to me* but he shakes his head, electric  
with distance.

Tree limbs moving across the screen of dress,  
a pawnshop garnet winks its chipped eye.

His own ring finger is circled with ink,  
little numbered wounds too fresh to scab.

Later, this will seem foolish. Bleeding the date  
into his skin while her promise slips away,

loosened by suds, rainwater  
into any passing drain or sewage grate.  
So easily gone.

2.

*Should we toast to something?* she asks.

They'd bought cans of St. Ambroise at the déj  
and white chocolate with hazelnuts

when they couldn't find cake. She'd said: *It'll be bad luck  
if I can't feed you*, tradition weighing on her before fridges  
of sweating tallboys, city hall certificate in her fist.

They can't think of a toast that avoids the pitfalls  
of cliché, so they get drunk in silence. Freeing hazelnuts  
to toss at the mangiest squirrels.

*No, not that one*, says Dalila. *He still has half his tail.*

Samson, unsure what rules they play by, keeps aim.

3.

She liked him best without his friends. He didn't know  
how he found her with friends  
because she didn't have any.

*Who are you inviting to the wedding?* his mother asked  
in a call from Winnipeg, boxcars roaring down the wire.  
His childhood home rattled.

*–No one. –No one?* Reproach is a hard knife to catch.  
*–Dalila doesn't have anyone she can invite.*  
*–You always did want to be special.*

Missed it, again.

4.

S: *To love?*

D: *Too generic. Let me try.*

S: *Go for it.*

D: *To unending happiness?*

S: *Too Hallmark. We're not very good at this.*

*What about... to continuation?*

D: *That's too cold, almost mathematical.*

S: *What do you mean?*

D: *It's calculating. Like we're counting down.*

S: *But to continue is an expansion. A gathering of days, moments, memories. The good stuff.*

D: *No.*

S: *That's it? No?*

D: *Yes.*

S: *I'm out. You go.*

D: *To less-than-hideous progeny, a home without vermin, and a blindness to each other's shortcomings?*

S: *I'm not drinking to that.*

D: *But you will drink.*

5.

Dalila gets off the blanket. Samson stays put.

So she sits behind him on the grass. *Lean back?*

He does, resting his head on her knees. Gentle.

They've done this before. There's a safety in it.

Or a familiarity, and the two are often confused.

*Don't make me fall asleep*, he says. Dusk has fallen.

Their ombré skyline is combed by searchbeams.

Air cocoons his sprawled body, warm and still.

*We could sleep here, Sam. The city as our nightlight.*



## Duplicates

Dalila comes home to him, smelling of espresso. How fine the grind to launch bean dust through the air, nestling back into her sweater. Winter has a scent too. Smoky, somehow accented by all those unseen furnaces, like the earth itself craves heat. Today she watched a man share a *chocolatine* with his toddler. *Why do fathers make babies seem appealing?* she wonders and misses her mother in a kneejerk of guilt.

Samson unbuttons her. There's an oblong smear along her clavicle bone. It comes off as a stain on his hand. He muses over the other men who saw and thought to lay their mouths where she is no longer marked. *Oh, it's coffee grounds. Smell me.* Today he watched his co-workers string an anatomical heart sculpture from the rafters. Or, was it a crayfish? Uncanny how two forms can merge, identical from this distance.

She thinks: *He seems so far away sometimes.* This was appealing at first. A man of secrets, depth in his thoughts but brevity of voice. *We're married now she'd say you have to tell me things.* Her mother didn't teach her how to cope with a husband who frowns while chopping rosemary, seems preoccupied by what hands can do. Always reaching to translate herself into his dialect. *A shown hipbone means pay close attention.*

He says: *You're cold. Come here, come in.* They're still there in the hallway, he's holding her olive-coloured pea coat, scarf, left glove, and the chemise she'd been wearing. This is routine. *Buttons are an invitation he'd say don't act like you didn't know.* Words to elongate slow evenings where light streams in, like an overexposed polaroid of what has been and seems to repeat, and repeats.

In love (ii)

*You're my favourite person* she said once. He knew she meant it even if theirs wasn't a dim sum and candlesticks kind of love. More a camaraderie of the unmoored. A love to muck up in. She was luminous under the strands of cranberries that lit up so many friends' living rooms. Rosebuds bloomed in glowing marks on her neck. He was held by a bracket of freezer door and *frigo*. Neglected at hand: an ex-lover's drink, a freepouring ginger in the rye. He'll go weeks only knowing that pink glow. All the heads he over-looked to see her the next room, blue beer bottle tearing up on her silk shorts. A love to whiteout. How many nights where friends could've been walls? Could've been decorative planters? Could've been talking to him? Always played the radio. Each window is propped open by an assorted citrus but rooms still congest with summer. How many pounds to implode a grapefruit? A love to fuck up physics. His whiskey cheered him with its clinking glass hearts. He's pristinely drunk, in memory he holds her like a man with much to give, like he emitted pink light himself.

Don't run back inside

The timeline for giddiness is 6 months.  
By then things become frayed, a little  
worn to show the bones.

When he sings at night, it's still nice.  
She won't put him out with his cat  
who prowls the door like a creditor.

Pick out a melody. He likes the times  
he never lived, keeps Springsteen tucked  
under his tongue.

The only poetry he'll ever need: *Make roses  
from your lovers, plant crosses in the rain.*  
Most mantras are picked up misheard.

She won't correct him. Lying spine-to-stone  
on the uneven terrace. Slabs he interlocked  
without leveling the dirt.

The dusk smells of charcoal pits and fire  
from matches. A book rests on her neck.  
She's musing over chemical combustions,  
what we attract and fail to resist.

Badness

Her mother surprises with bags of food.

Dalila slouches  
by the kitchen counter with a silence reserved

for escaped convicts,  
nail files stitched into their thick socks

as Sam puts on the kettle, keeps one-sided court.

He talks about playing blind  
to the kids who scale statues at the MAC,

the buzz of earpiece, supervisors mocking  
him for his *chignon*, his piecemeal French.

Sam doesn't have many stories

that aren't about Dalila.  
Can't tell those with her there, so quiet

with light thrown through spaces  
in her hair, the lacework of her blouse.

*It's hard to get anything past those lips*

her mother says  
in a lull, setting down her cold tea.

*Upset her?*  
*She'll stop eating to spite you*

and like a kid told a dog-eared joke,  
Dalila smiles.

Dieu du Ciel

Now she's saying *Let's get a little fucked up*  
and emptying his pockets.

*There's nothing to find there* he lies, drunk  
already in hibiscus beer

but she's holding out what she wants,  
slipping it back into his hand.

Together they'll drown  
smooth white pills and rue St-Laurent

will part its smudgy, glittering palms.

Using

She's leaning over the railing, back curved to a bracket  
in her whitest dress. A du Maurier at lip-height. Not his

brand. He recognizes the smell, how it whiplashes you  
in backalleys where chefs mill about like sweating ghosts.

*Where'd you get that, Dalila?* Keeps his voice even, knowing

she won't answer if he wavers to accuse. Never would  
buy her own. No trail of debit slips, a vice uncharted.

Her smirking reply: *your coat pocket?*

\*

White lies pepper the *good days* when she shows up  
like herself but adorned with fresh ink, constellatons  
of bruises.

Undressing Dalila is an examination:

autopsying a breathing lover for giveaways,  
how the world slips up upon a body, fingerprints  
deposited like braille.

Once, after sex, she said: *I knew my ex was cheating  
when I found tampon shells in his trash.*

Evidence, almost irrelevant, when doubt creeps in.

\*

Dalila says:

*What do you think I've done?*

Her question an ember. A match struck and held  
to a bundle of twigs,

twine-tied to a fox's tail. The creature cradles  
itself in Sam's arms, mewing like a kitten

but if he sets it free, there's nothing  
it won't burn.

III.

Fallout



They weren't the right scissors

When all useful things were art,  
they'd have been triangles of bronze:

blades brought together by a single spring,  
upon them some thoughtful etching made.

Not a holy desecration wrought  
by nail scissors, those tiny pedestrian fangs.

But as he lies in her lap, his heavy crown  
pins her cross-legged to their bed

in sleep, there's no choosing.  
Her arm can only reach so far

to feel through the sidetable clutter for  
a blade nearly too common to fell a god.

## Fiction

Dalila tells a story of the man who tried. He got up each morning. He tied back his long hair, he muzzled his body in a dark uniform.

The gold badge said *sécurité*. On bad days, she pinned it to her own clothes.

Stable, belonging. More than a girl weeping in rosebud pajamas. *The wounded are alluring before you realize they can't turn it off.*

They had this talk. She was still in bed. She spent her life pocketing bad things. They slid off him like silver coins into a fountain.

*There is no Dalila. She's a character me-with-an-H created.* Thumps her ribcage for emphasis, where the bad should rattle.

Samson is lost. He was looking at the sky, or rather the ceiling painted to mimic the night.

*I guess the ceiling is sort of like us,* he says. But actually, he doesn't. She'd seen John feeding clever lines to George & Ringo

and thought: why can't lovers be hungry shells? Regurgitating perfect pearls of love and understanding?

What he says is: *I need to go.* And he means *go to work* but it rings absolute like the goodbye click of her nana's rotary phone.

Stupid shit

Men who help with the second glove. Air plucking up her hair as she steps outside, bartered cigarette behind her ear. Kisses under red lights & in front of high-rise windows. The hymns of a tattoo gun. Taxidermy iguanas. Naming squirrels after live bootlegs of Elliott Smith. Defaced stop signs & bilingual graffiti. Writing dirty talk on cocktail napkins. Pork dumplings in broth. Kid scissors with novelty blades. Tall-ceilinged caverns of rooms in echoing galleries. Teacups adorned by *literally any-other-flower* except roses. Lilacs tinged with rust. Terrace suppers of rooster sauce drizzled on knockoff KD. PB cookies with enough salt. The way coffee tastes after morning sex. Opening a bed made warm by another's body heat. Cradling a lover who has fallen asleep. Last Sunday when she tried on a pair of tight synthetic leather pants, having snuck Sam through the changing curtains, fingers in his mouth, laughing *no laughing*. Likes how he likes dressing her. Hands cool as buttons against her skin & right then Dalila is happy.

## On the Last

### i. Day

Half a year married, his champagne birthday. It's mild and they walk along the Lachine. Dalila is complaining *we were so painfully certain*. She's holding her hair away from a grimace. The ice below splinters. Sky emptied of sound, no gulls. *I don't remember it that way* he says. Marriage had started out as a joke they kept retelling. *Young, naïve and oh-so stupid*. Did she just mutter that? Fingers against her temples like she's holding back her thoughts from billowing out: black-dipped wings, gulls at a kill. Sam bends to pick up a rock, polished flat by some ocean. They're nowhere near the ocean. Hurls it forward. *You really picked a hell of a day for this*. Her eyes steady on him now, somewhere a stone hits.

ii. Evening

She tells him *I'm jealous of those women who came before,*  
of those who felt him shudder out in motel bedrooms.  
What can a body decipher of its lover's past? It drinks  
peppermint tea. It contemplates. It lounges in listless air  
as he smokes on the terrace, irate. Another failed fucking,  
white-gloved and put to bed. *We've started* she almost says.  
Feeding flowerboxes with ash. Nothing matters beyond  
the exit. Former lives creep the fringes, seeming relevant.  
Soon this too will be over. Relegated to bad gifts and old  
letters where the *xo's* feign depth to misjudge duration.  
She's watching the tense span of his back, how he seems  
to loosen with the rising smoke. Relieved, somehow.

### iii. Night

Dalila offers two birthday gifts: a burgundy sitar and a haircut. Sam's spine is rigid against the wooden chair as she takes up the scissors, pink plastic-handled like he's the intended victim in a kindergartener's craft. *You don't look a thing like Jesus now.* Was that a riff on a Killers refrain? No. Her words choked. She's probably crying again, small feet wreathed by his hair. He should turn to look. Would it be so wrong if he didn't? Those goddamn tears. At first he'd have atoned for a dozen men's sins to make her stop. Dalila wept like a Waterhouse heroine might with those sad doe eyes, gazing into the void. It wore him down. Silver coins stowed behind her ears, ready to flourish magically at will. The flour aisle while hugging a box of Devil's Food. Inside the arrival gates of an only trip to Winnipeg. His niece's 5<sup>th</sup> birthday party. On a busy metro platform in morning commute. Public libraries. Elevators. *So, what do I look like to you?* Hair keeps falling in soft thuds. Bound to his wooden throne, Sam can't separate the blades from her fingers.

#### iv. Morning

Sam strums out *Paint It Black* as a slow motion calamity. The cigarette neglected on his mug's handle, ashes onto a Beatrix Potter plate. He can't remember who brought it into their NDG apartment, as if they shared a childhood. She'd have played in North End trainyards with cooler kids, brandishing her fresh scabs and missing buttons as he spied through chain-link. Always a safe distance away, glossy art textbooks and his mom's warnings pressed to his chestbone. *What's changed?* Sam, the eternal keeper-upper. Carrying her, seasick from Kraken black rum, up the stairs at Charlevoix metro. *Nothing ever changed.* He'd bound himself to her. Dalila, so resolute in her deceptions. She was, if anything, consistent. Setting Sam up to play *the strong one*, only to clip pieces of him away as if they'd sprout back. He puts down his sitar. The last lilt of music siphons from the floorboards and walls ripple with stillness. Dalila is asleep, or pretending. Empty suffocates his ears, pounding in his temples. *I'm done.* Throwing on his coat to pierce daylight, Sam's eyes pool with sun as he steps into the road. From a perch, his cat stares till it can't. Then the scream of car brakes. It licks its paw.

Somewhere, there is an end

*I'm leaving you*, she says. And blue lightening flickers again at his peripherals. It's so weirdly gorgeous, to disappear into a rainstorm's pulse. Her silhouette on the white door is veined by light.

\*

*I'm leaving you*, she says. And he fishes for a cigarette, finding she's smoked the last one. *Why are you always doing this, Dal?* Pausing in her trajectory to the doorknob, she almost asks what he means.

*She's drunk*, he thinks. *She'll come back.*

\*

*I'm done here*, he says. And she laughs at the finality of it. That if he grabs his wallet and stuffs the cat under his arm, they'll be over as he hits the outside. Like exiting a cinema, readjusting to daylight, to life.

*No. You aren't.*

\*

He's half-naked in his blue bathtub. His shirt rehomed elsewhere and everywhere is sticky. Eye sockets scorching with pain. An eclipse of mid-afternoon, impossibly dark.

*What did we do to each other?*

\*

She's gone. And he's downing double ryes at Sparrow. If Dalila were at his elbow, she'd be drinking cucumber jus in gin. *If she were here—fuck, I've got to stop doing this.* He looks for a hipster to agitate into petty blows. Needs to feel any other pain.



\*

She's gone. And he's in their bed, watching lights  
shiver and explode across the ceiling. This isn't good.  
*Dalila*, he pleads with her voicemail. *My eyes are coming apart.*

## Hit & Run

It's not a melodrama without a man lying  
bloodied in the road during Sunday brunch  
with all cute families supping on soft yolks  
and blood orange mimosas in NDG cafés.

The bleeding man is contemplating last  
kisses and whether it's poetic or pathetic  
for the dying to cry out for their mothers  
like each is offering a hand and missing.

He thinks he might be waiting for that  
moment where the ghost-self unfastens  
the buttons of his skeleton and settles  
curbside as a mute witness to the flock.

For a crowd has grown and circles him,  
their shoes muttering like geese in a field  
and he wants to raise his face to extend  
some pacifying breadcrumb like *it's okay*.

But blue-hot ribbons of pain coil his eyes,  
tongue and all other muscles, slackening  
the leaking vessel he can no longer fully  
inhabit, nor regain his footing to desert.

IV.

Cleanup

Dalila at the metro

Wonder if regret should tip the scales  
balanced between returning on a westbound train  
or *keep going, for god's sake keep going.*

A woman beside the escalator  
holds a cardboard sign professing hunger,  
four young children.

Her skeptical side wants proof  
but there they are, photographs attached with paste.  
She offers a coin to relieve the coldness in her gut.

Who is he when she's not there?  
The question is like a sickness,  
she is heavy with it by dusk. Throat constricted.

Just take a few pills before bed,  
submerge where memories blur. The only advice  
her mother ever gave: *Don't catch a falling knife.*

She is sorry. *Yes.*  
But an apology is not what he wants,  
and what he does, she does not know.

Out a revolving door, five stops past where  
she knows he will be. The world smells of cedar  
branches and of tar.

Unsaid, her true question struggles with  
the underpinning of itself: Was she enough light  
to leave a shadow in her wake?

Pine-Sol

They send a woman to clean the bathtub.

Samson is unsure who *they* are. His home has become  
an open window.

Emissaries fly in like honeybees, leave prints  
on all surfaces  
before scrubbing them away again.

He doesn't know if he wants to live inside  
a synthetic lemon, his possessions all realigned  
and put away, unfindable.

But no one has bothered to ask—  
as if his tongue, too, were  
caked in scabs.

If Samson were a bee, he would speak  
in figure eights.  
Those unending loops of sound.

## Terrace

Sepulcher of dawn, no sparrows bickering in the maples when he rises to brew coffee, pour Cheerios into a bowl. Outside, he eats alone. A neighbour's cat weaves about his ankles, mewling candidly of hardships: being pushed away from a bowl of vanilla gelato and so forth. Feeling the dishevelment of its fur, mud on the ruff, he guesses *Gallagher. Maybe Sumac?* But the animal responds to both, pressing its nose into his palm for scraps. Samson sighs. He hasn't spoken in four days and now his companion is an undiscerning one. It wouldn't matter if the words would stop bubbling up in his mind, half-cooked, meant for her. The quiet siphoning out of anger came suddenly. He'd thought his love would stay a stain upon his skin. She took up such space. Filling even more in absence, all the expected places and ones he never knew to search.

## Readers

*This is a Q* says Samson to the cat. A queue, a sequence of pinpricks rising from glossy paper. Lanterns bobbing in black water. Their flames reach out to lick his hands. *No, maybe it's a P.* He feels again. A missing mole upon the skin. Drop-kick of thought and his wrists go quiet. The cat lands in his lap, scattering sheets of braille and his alphabet chart to the floor. *I guess we're done learning.* A trilled purr of agreement. He'd been thinking that books were Dalila's domain. Dalila held mesmerized in her red chair, the very last week, by *Suite vénitienne*. She'd told him: *Strangers are so beguiling with their eager wounds.* Always saying shit like that. It never hit him she had someone in mind, was mulling over leaving. There are no surprises. Dalila was honest enough with her worn scars. Each decipherable in its way.

## Departures

Dalila gets out of bed. She's been awake for a while.  
Tracing railroads in ceiling cracks.

The kitchen is warm with toasted rye. Alex has left her  
a French press and a pickles & havarti sandwich.

Her phone flashes: *Eat. You can't survive on coffee and sugar.*

There's something about grief. How others approach her  
like a small feral creature, unsure of its wants and needs.

The happy trill of two missed calls. Unheard voicemail.

She pads back to her room. Pulls on leggings, her sweater  
wafts with jasmine and tangerines. Clean.

Ties her hair into a topknot. *Bangs are a touch greasy, oh well.*  
*Will he know if I toss the breakfast?*

Returning, she folds the sandwich into parchment paper.  
A delicate box, her practical origami.

\*

*Cookie me.* She's standing by the café's dessert case.

Alex holds the battered tongs overhead, jaws refusing  
to bite.

*Which hobo at Mont-Royal metro is eating on my dime today?*  
he repeats their threadbare joke.

*Flora, answers Dalila. But next time, skip the chipotle mayo.*



*George doesn't care for spicy food.*

*George?*

*Her dog, of course.*

\*

There's an out-the-café line up going on.  
Some mother, displaced from Westmount, orders a *mocha babyccino* for her Burberry-clad toddler.

*Sorry, you want a what?* Alex stammers. His eyes frantic on Dalila's face.

*She means a hot chocolate.*

She froths milk, measures out espresso shots  
in a daze of thoughts.

Sam's voice in her messages again. Still asking  
but resigned to her silence. What could be said.

\*

Dalila hadn't been asleep.

The music hadn't woken her. His soft singing.  
*With flowers and my love both never to come back.*

Sitar vibrating out its unearthly sound.  
If galaxies moved, they'd sound like that.

When they met, she was enthralled  
by Sam's voice, roughed up by knockoff Marlboros.

It suited him. Him, in his unironed button-ups.  
A tall slouch of body.

Their life was a good memory.

Too poor to metro, they walked the city.

He liked to stop by Chez Nick. Treat her  
to *tarte au sucre*, watery coffee.

His 2½ in St-Henri had a loft bed, unmade.  
A ceiling of cigarette moons, he had made.

She'd hidden the burns with a blue cloth  
painted with silver circles. Like real sky,  
like constellations swaying.

On their last morning, she couldn't tell him.

The parting turn of his key came as a relief.

No slip of paper left to atone. She snuck down  
their fire escape as he went out the front door.

Entered the day separate as shadows.

\*

Alex is closing up. Dalila helps him  
stack mismatched chairs, sweeps stray crumbs.

She can feel Alex watching her as he counts cash.

They'll ride back together, he'll make her  
a late supper, and she'll keep disappointing him.

She rubs pastry flakes off her hands.  
Some memory rolls over.

Flour streaking Sam's hair, fingers sealing  
half-moons of dough. Dark ale and perogies.

How he claimed to have a Polish *babcia*  
in a childhood so far from hers.

Sam intruding into foreign kitchens,  
her new life.

*You're always thinking about him*, Alex would say.  
Contemptuous, repetitive.

And Dalila would shrug, *He's my husband*.  
Present tense lowered like an open hand,  
to slap or to reach. Depending on vantage.

## Homecomings

A lowball of whiskey is shoved into Sam's hand.  
He'd been running it over the table edge, trying to anchor himself.

Elliott, his new social worker, says he's taken him to Grumpy's.

But last time Elliott told him they were going to the pub,  
Sam ended up in a barber's plush chair. A razor held to his chin.

*Don't be so dramatic, Elliott says. You know where she is. Go see her.*

Samson moves his hand to his face. Smooth jawline, puffy eyelids.

Prosthetics heavy as agate marbles in the sockets. Iris colour pulled  
from old photos of his mother's.

She'd carried the album from YWG to YUL. White-knuckled it,  
kept it closed.

Her voice, merging with the chortles and beeps. Hospital machines  
in full song.

\*

Minor bodily trauma:

Three fractured ribs. Torso lacerations. Sizeable bruises.

Major facial trauma:

Severe optical damage from debris, impact. Broken nose.

Enucleation procedure scheduled.

\*

*I've told you, Elliott. She'd already left.*

There hadn't been a note.  
Only \$400 in twenties stuffed inside his pillowcase.  
Her share of April's rent.

Empty hangers like wire skeletons. Books lying slanted.  
A missing African violet.

It took awhile for anyone to figure it out.

To map a timeline of departure. Appearing at her work,  
grey-faced and yelling, his brother had confronted her.

A multitude of missed calls. Dialed from Sam's phone.  
All gone adrift.

Dalila led his brother outside by the elbow. Her quiet  
question deflated him: *What are you talking about?*

*Didn't having a fucking clue*, the brother would say later.

Sitting by the bed, he unpacked her words. Hands rearranging  
Sam's meal tray: chemical-smelling jello, a mashed meat sammie,  
juice with a peel top.

His brother never liked her.

She was aloof. Spoke in strange ambiguities.  
But when she cried that afternoon, he offered his shoulder.

\*

The bar is filling up. Samson can hear chairs  
being pulled back, the froth of beer, a band setting up  
guitars and amps nearby.

Elliott buys him another drink. *That guy she lives with—*

*Alex, Samson supplies.*

*Right. Are they together?*

He doesn't know. He'd like to think not. It would erode all he thought he knew of his wife.

Near the end, jealousy sat sparrow-like.  
Its beak at his earlobe. Tiny talons holding court.

Samson would visit Dalila at the café, watch another man rest his hands on her shoulders, the hollow of lower back.

*She was so serious with me, but she'd be laughing with him.*

Elliott is silent but might be nodding. Sam's body buzzes with drink. He wants a real Marlboro, a basket of fries.

His wants, so streamlined lately. So unfamiliar to crave anything new.

\*

She'd have left him for this. Oh, he was wretched.

Hopped up on drip-pump analgesics. Then sedated for pulling out his IVs, for trying to leave.

*Not to be cruel, said his mother. But you weren't going to get very far.*

Her patience, a thin line. Samson kept treading it. Belligerent.

A refusal to shave and his insistency on feeding himself, snapped it in half.

Dusting crumbs from his bristled face,  
she told him she'd booked a ticket home.

He couldn't blame her. He was living in his anger.  
A hot impulsive grief.

After his brother saw her, Sam was convinced  
Dalila would show.

Days passed in agitation. He listened to TV, ate  
sometimes, and slept.

But she kept away. Silence is its own answer.

\*

On his mother's last visit, she brought Elliott.

*He's a guitarist like you. You'll get along.*

Samson thought otherwise.

Elliott spoke with a spider-thin voice.  
He liked Johnny Walker Red, novellas  
translated from Russian, and his 60's Gibson.

For the first week, they didn't talk.

Elliott would read while Sam wallowed,  
irritated by his disinterest, the pages flipping.

Said on the eighth day, *I'd kill for a smoke.*

The book is set down. Cigarettes rattle about  
in Elliott's shirt pocket.

*Let's go outside,* he answers.

Phantasm

She arrives in the misplacement  
of small things:

water mist on the tiles, a room flush  
with lilac perfume, his moccasins lying  
haphazard by the pantry, ajar.

Oddities gather into a fear that keeps  
his heart a fist,

careful details of a measured life  
pooling out into blackness.

He senses her pinned to  
his movements as his mirrored self  
might still be,

footfalls left at hours only moths  
and the dead patrol,

air stirring past  
becomes a hand on his face.