

## The Effects of Sweetland

This piece was largely inspired by Michael Crummey's ability to create and convey the distinct and intricate characters in *Sweetland*. All of them stood out in their own ways, from their actions to the way they talked to their relationships with others. More specifically, the character Loveless truly stood out as well as Crummey's ability to show us who Loveless is instead of just telling. In this way, I also tried to give my characters the same breath of life.

## snow in september

This isn't how I want to remember her: swaying on a barstool at ten p.m. on a Tuesday. Arms around my shoulders, singing *I'm in love* as if it's a confession before leaning back and cackling, all precarious like. I don't want to remember her hand brushing my breasts, her faux gasp of innocence lost to the same three people singing karaoke over and over again in a bar with too many corners and not enough shadows. Tomorrow she returns to her homeland, a place where shovels are kept in bathrooms because snakes hide in toilets and dust storms happen without warning. I, on the other hand, will continue to run circles around the city, my gilded cage, where winter is always coming and if not, it's construction.

I first met her years ago through a friend neither of us care to mention in polite company. She became a constant for nearly two years before she was called home due to tragedy and we lost touch. Now, she's only here for a few months but we fell back into our old routines as if we'd been practicing on our own. We always had what the other needed even if we didn't know they needed it. Smokes, water, food? Got it. A rally call for a late night adventure on a bad day? We're there. It's a shame, truly, that so much of us hums to the same frequency but her heart wasn't meant for my hands.

The sound of a new voice on the speakers brings me back to the moment, glancing over to her as she screams about how she *just loves this song*. I couldn't help but feel exposed for her with only a red corset pushing her breasts up to her neck and a pair of tight leggings. Maybe it's because she has no pockets and her beat-up pack of Canadians, dollar-store lighter and torn wallet sit on the table all night. Or maybe it's because she keeps running her hands over her body every time she gets the chance regardless of who is looking. I know objectively she's attractive— tall, blonde, thin and with an Aussie accent —but I feel no desire burning through

me when she licks her lips and stares at mine. The only thing I feel is dread in the pit of my stomach. The kind that tells you you'll probably wake up crying.

She curls into herself, bringing her drink to rest on the gentle curve of her breasts, the condensation changing the colour of her corset from firetruck to bloody red. "Looks like you did a bit of coke before you got here." She taps my nose and laughs. Goes to lick her thumb and wipe my face but I move away and let her stumble into the table.

"You know I didn't."

It's not that I want to leave but that I wish I had never shown up. Her and her friends were all fucked by the time I got there. I couldn't even tell if it was only alcohol that had them sideways and I didn't want to ask. I have never been comfortable with losing control and she wasn't a fan of maintaining it. We'd smoke weed and drink together on our nights out. Still, I could never bring myself to try anything else until she handed me a rolled up bill at party where I knew no one but her and told me to go town.

I wasn't ready, I said to her. If I was gonna step outside my limits, I was going to do it somewhere safe like I promised a friend who has always been overprotective of me. The deal we made was if I wanted to delve into drugs, they'd buy it, try it and then decide if I could do even the smallest amount. They were the addict and I was the innocent and nothing was going to change that.

She laughed when I told her about that. "Life is about living it," she said, holding my face. "Don't hide from the small pleasures they try to deny us."

She cut the line with a card she pulled from her bra, pushed the bill to my nose, plugged the other nostril and told me to breathe in. Everything afterwards is nothing but a vague memory. Everything except the fracture in our relationship as I spent the next day regretting my actions.

Although I was curious about that world it was never one I wanted to engage in. But there I was: my insides twisted into knots as my nose dripped, dripped, dripped. I promised myself I would never do it again even if it cost me my relationship with her.

She pushes away from the table, now, away from her boyfriend who's gripping her arm, and tries to fall into me. I grab her, keeping her at a distance as she tries to steady herself. "So happy you're here, babe. So happy."

It's no secret that I've always been off tempo. Always unsure of what to do or what to say. How to move forwards or backwards. People either mean too little or too much to me and I find myself as easily consumed by some as I am confounded by my expectations of them and the reality of their actions. My internal compass never calibrated itself well enough to navigate these situations and I rarely feel worse off for it until I end up in muddy waters.

But now I wish I had a little more experience at the helm. I'm at a loss for how to approach the situation. Do I retreat? Do I attack head on? Do I tell her that there was once a time I maybe would've tried for more but now I can't even fathom crossing that line?

Earlier that month we had signed a contract together, me being the last to put the pen down. She looked at the stupid arbitrary piece of paper, picked it up and pointed at our names side by side. "Look," she said grinning, "we're like a superpower lesbian couple."

I laughed the way people laugh when there is no other option but to either make things awkward or change the subject abruptly. Tried to ignore her look of disappointment as she put the paper down. Tried not to think about it as her and her boyfriend broke up and made up three times in just as many months. We had our moment and we lost it, I wanted to tell her, but not for nothing. I've seen her soul and I love her for it. It's just that sometimes love needs to happen at a distance.

It's not the idea of a same-sex relationship that scares me, even if this would be my first. It's the weight of being responsible for the emotions of someone so powerfully fragile. She lives her life as if the wind is the only thing that guides her, lost to her wanderlust. Mine calls to me over my shoulder like a faint echo. It's song quiet enough I can pretend I don't hear it as I continue to wrestle with reality — a fight I don't plan on losing. Her love is so light I might as well be chasing a tornado with a butterfly net, hoping for the best when my feet aren't even touching the ground and all I can think about is that this isn't how I want to remember her.

I want to remember her at three a.m. on a Thursday chasing the Northern lights down a road we could never find again. Burning inside and out: holding onto thin paper cups, filling our lungs with smoke. I want to remember her hair coloured like a bowl of spaghetti without enough sauce. Her quiet frustration at not being able to capture the lights with her phone. I want that silence instead of this steady chorus of *I love you, just want you to know I really love you* when I try to make it home before Wednesday. It feels cheap to say anything back so I let her kiss me when her boyfriend isn't looking, ignoring her questions of *what does it mean?* and drive home without my seatbelt on as if the weight of it all enough to hold me back.