

# DUX/DUCKS

LOLA FARQUHAR

OUT  
ON THE  
SHELVES

I'm sitting at our scraped sepia table, hot dahl on my plate, and feeling calmer than I expected. I'd anticipated the tight jaw and humming bones, but all the chaos of my brain has dissipated. Or perhaps it has finally reached the degree where the volume is so loud I've gone deaf to it. I'm sitting at this table, eating this dahl, and in around two hours I'll find out if everything I've done this year was worth it. The extrinsic validation to salve the ache in my shoulders. My year has been measured in emails, grades, and production. My body has consistently tried its best to stop me, but I have something to prove.

It's Halloween today. It was Halloween when we moved into this leaky house. A sideways anniversary of sorts. I've always liked Halloween the most out of the über-consumerist holidays. Something about getting to put on a performance, be someone I'm not for a change, defy expectations. One year I dressed as the Reaper and felt drunk on the euphoria of being unrecognisable. No feminine responsibility, just death and doom.

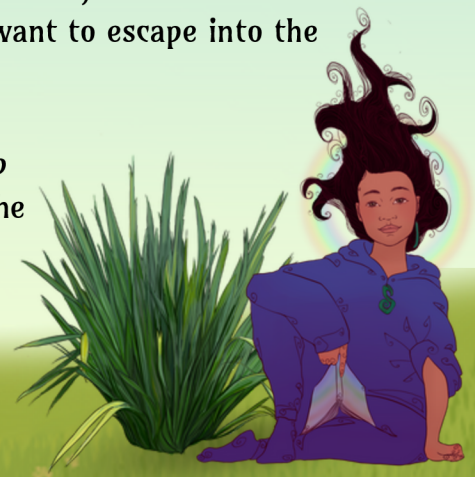
Tonight I'm forgoing the gory spectacle to sit onstage like a sweet lamb and appease the masses with a plum-plucked smile. I'm deeply attuned to this particular performance — it was one thing to write about RuPaul for my year 10 English assignment, another to be so visible in front of an entire school. I can play this part for one more night. The stars are almost out.

We arrive squashed into the little black Tiida, and I swim around in the throngs searching for my friends. I latch onto the first I find and scope out the hall. High ceilings, rafters perfect for a myna to perch on, disco ball disappointingly not spinning. It's grown smaller and smaller every year, each panel of wood carefully shifted a centimetre inward when I'm not paying attention.

My eye catches a fearfully familiar profile and a swollen heart plummets into the dense acid of my gut. Flower sits at the top corner of the bleachers. I haven't seen them for almost a year. I do not know if they want to see me. But I will be a caged bird in full view for the entire evening for everyone, no matter where they sit. I want to escape into the night air.

I stumble back out to the foyer and all I can hear is ringing. I slip into my place in line and ignore how my legs want to melt into the floor like a pale, wet mess that would only make things worse.

"Are you alright?"



"You can always leave out the back."

"You don't have to come up."

I do have to. I have had to since I was eleven. I will not let down my fresh-eyed, red-faced self. I am thankful that I did not eat much at dinner.

I wait for my eyes to stop stinging and fold my words tighter into my hand. We walk through the hall like cattle and I am conscious the whole time to keep my expressions sufficiently tamed. My palms are sweating. I have always been a sweaty person, always been an anxious person. Can a heart burst if it rabbits too fast? The speeches start and my nervous system gives in to the adrenaline rush of an awards ceremony.

I'm distant. I look up and see myself reflected in the eyes of a seabird, all milky feathers and thrumming body. I soar through silky stretches of sky and the clouds look like home, billowing and quiet. It's so quiet save for the gentle crash of waves meeting one another and an occasional flock of feathers passing with vibrance. The ocean glitters and I am not afraid of it. I am not afraid of it and I am not afraid of anything. Even in storms I find a rocky outcrop to shelter in and make friends with the hermit crabs.

My breaths are sea salt and I snap to attention when my name is called. I'm being recognised as an incredible young woman, head girl, a final milestone in my school career, and my teeth are gritted when I smile. My gums thick and scripted. The evening passes in a blur and I walk across the stage more times than I remember, only tripping over the mic cord once. I feel rot in my stomach roiling that I have grown accustomed to this. It's a sort of sick reality that I seem to scoop up endless praise and cannot even savour it.

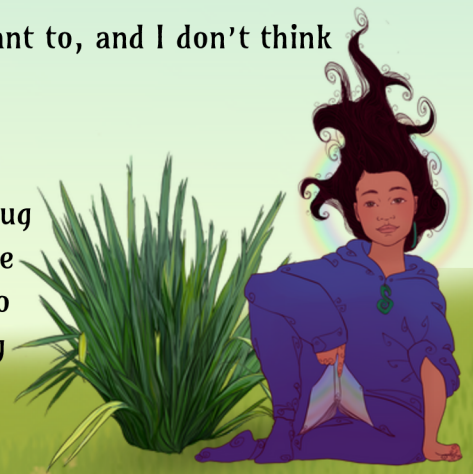
There is some pride in each award — that I'm doing it for the community, doing it to prove that dyed hair and Doc Martens don't make you lesser. I told my friend that as long as one of us gets dux, the gays are winning.

She gets proxime accessit.

I get a standing ovation.

Flower leaves before I can approach. I'm not really sure that I want to, and I don't think they would want me to either. But I thought about it.

I'd been destroyed when they left me. So much more broken over this friendship than my first sapphic relationship. The splinters dug themselves into every part of my room. I remember walking home and picking up each glinting piece of rubbish I encountered just so I would feel like I wasn't totally worthless. I remember distancing



myself from my friends so that I wouldn't be too much for them too. As long as I can fly I wouldn't mind which bird I am.

The high only lasts until I've said thank you to a last vaguely familiar parent, and then I'm crying in the dark on the way home in our zippy little Tiida, wholly submerged in my winnings and my second-ever bouquet of flowers. It's pathetic that I do not even enjoy the moment. I want to fly back up into the night sky and look down at the insignificance of my emotions. Maybe I'll trace constellations with my wings.

I've always been pronounced a star. I have mixed feelings about that metaphor. It seems like a lonely existence and an explosive end rather than glitz and glamour. I suppose I do feel a certain comfort from stargazing. Seems selfish to pedestal someone and then leave them up there alone. I don't know.

I step out to the top of the violet-lined path to my house, shedding the certificates, which flutter in harsh lines to the stone. I feel sick. My face is sticky with tears but the cool night helps. A sudden surge of prickling along my arms gives way to flickers of agitation. I gasp as stark black feathers tear the skin in a haste to emerge, and specks of blood mix with fresh, glossy plumage. My body waxes and wanes. Tough skin and talons scratch cracked dirt, and the thudding in my chest intensifies to a drum. It hurts a little.

I surprise myself with a throaty noise that I don't think I've made before, and the beating of my heart coalesces with the beating of wings. A solid flap sends a few certificates into the undergrowth. I'm jolted into open air and a rush overwhelms me. I flock higher and higher, out of panic mostly. My mind has ceded to the whims of this compact, hollow frame. The letterbox shrinks into blackness and I surpass the kānuka. I'm lofty enough to glimpse the sea on the horizon, inky and glowing under the moon. The flowers look so small.

I think that this was the moment I found a small pocket of my being that glowed gold without brass. I'm a small mess of feathers and exhilaration and I'm swooping higher and higher and away. I feel more alive in the clouds than on that stage, no audience, only stars. One word cannot encapsulate a life's work. It's blinding. It won't last.

Later, I sit at the scraped sepia table and there is no dahl, only cold silver trophies.

