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## I. INTRODUCTION

Blah di blah



## II. POETRY

MERUNISA AHMED

*Ways of making love*

I struggle to find the right way to love you.

Loneliness creeps to my bedside whenever you aren't there and

Over time I grow fonder of the things you say and do

Victim of your heart and soul I am nothing but

Everything to you.

You seize me with your beauty and

Outshine any other person in the room, to me you are my

Utopia.

SUMAIYA AHMED

*The aftermath*

silence stretches between us,  
awkwardness wrapping around  
our bodies like a vice, stifling heat scorching  
every inch of my skin. it blooms red on your  
ivory arms, like a splotch of blood or paint,  
or spilled wine – the colour of your hair,  
a waterfall of silk and god's drink in a goblet  
of moonlight and splintered hearts.  
we're in the same room but miles apart,  
you aren't looking at me and I feel like I'm drowning  
pretending not to notice the way your hands turn to fists  
when my name is called right after yours  
it's like even with the time that passed, we are haunted by the ghosts of  
way back when and when we descend, the memories reach down my throat  
curling a hand around the remains of my heart,  
talons scraping a trail of bloody memories and bruising kisses  
the summer I told you *I love you* for the first time, when you laughed  
into my mouth tasting of salt from the pool and the blackberry ice lolly  
you sucked on moments before  
I can still taste your laughter in my mouth  
it is sharp and bitter now,  
chased by longing and nights spent stretching out beneath the moon  
wishing I could hit rewind and go back to when you were mine.

## Dying while still breathing

The sun slants into my open mouth,  
a sharp sword slicing away at my graveyard teeth,  
broken down into nothing. Blood is angry on my tongue,  
the taste of every silenced cry filling me up from the inside,  
your words echoing like an arrow never missing its target:  
my quiet submission, a pretence of peace, a picture of *whole*.

The gentle cradle of my spine bows in pleading to a god  
that doesn't answer – I have already been told  
patience leads to reward in another life.

Water fills my lungs, unshed tears burning with unending rage,  
a story centuries old –  
every girl is taught she is nothing in the eyes of society.

Purity is everything in this world, but innocence is

y a n k e d                                    t o r n                                    r i p p e d

*s t o l e n*

from me, from us, when our eyes are wide, bodies not yet sculpted with  
soft womanly curves, still reaching for *my little pony* toys.

The stars wink out and the sky gives up, covering the  
eyes of the moon so she doesn't see him

t o u c h i n g                                    me.

I am taught to hide away every truth threatening to explode,  
a riptide, a bullet needing to ricochet against every wall built  
up around me. I am inhaling every 'he's the reason I wanted to  
die at nine' like acid, like it's poison and I can't get enough.

## *Self-portrait of a brown girl*

I dream of shedding my skin and stepping into the body of a white woman  
for a day, splintered fragments of blush and candle wax  
dripping down my face like paint, like tears, like blood.

In this dream, my palms are cupped in a gentle cradle, a sliver of silver  
stars falling from my eyes, my brown body blowing with the harsh winter's wind.  
I take the night sky in my mouth and swallow it whole, filling

Every empty space with midnight and indigo.

The need to paint my gold-brown body shades of ivory and cream  
whistles through me. In reality, I wear the hijab in fear of a white man

Pushing me in front of a train. I wear the hijab in love of a God telling me  
the struggle only leads to reward in a life better than this. Tawakkul  
means trusting in God's plan.

And I dream myself with hair loosened, a waterfall of black silk and a swarm of  
crows, burying inside the cage of my chest. There, they build a  
castle made of bones and paint it shades of indigo. They rake their wings against

My quivering heart, a concrete reminder:  
defying the white man's idea of beauty is a battle half won.

In this dream, I am flying through the silver sun, cutting away the white woman's  
whispers of liberating myself from a man's demands. I tell her it is for me,  
it is for a God I love. Why can nuns cover themselves, but Muslims are demonised

And dehumanised for the very same act?

Surprise colours her shades of rose pink, under an archway of the silver sun  
turning to egg yolk yellow. I dream myself brave, wielding a weapon of

Faith in place of a gun.

The crows between my ribs fly out of my unhinged mouth,  
circling the air before disintegrating to ash. I taste God's help in the wind,

Dig my teeth into it so it doesn't fade. I no longer want to shed the glorious brown  
of my skin, a dream hacking away at reality.

I burn so bright in the indigo night; inside me it paints my blood

In shades of gold and honey, sweet and strong, like the river in Eden.

It tells me my home is with Al-Wadūd. After sinking, I learn to fly.

I surrender the dream of painting my body white and rise up into the sky.

## Hummingbird

My heart like that of a broken thing,  
wings of a flightless bird beating in my chest  
fingerprints blurred into every soft curve  
sinking into every priceless memory of you.

I still taste your laughter in my mouth,  
sharp and sweet, a silver dagger slicing me in half.  
My fingers like that of a compass needle,  
reaching out for an empty love

Always pointing in the direction you left.  
A baby bird pecks at the remains of my heart,  
a sinking fist of muscle and flesh and blood  
cracking behind the hollow mausoleum of my chest.

Ghosts of memories past curl around my throat,  
into the smoke-filled lungs and forgotten touches  
of your hands on my waist, on my ribcage,  
drowning skeletons behind a smile

Saying 'I'm over him' to anyone who asks.  
Dreams are lies are knives stabbing into the soft  
white of my eyes, grabbing them to flush away  
your face and boiling them in *forgetting*.



I cling to hold on, I breathe to let go –  
the flightless bird in my chest burns  
your fingerprints off my skin,  
a hummingbird singing without you.

But it still hurts.

## *Blue's blues*

Happy is foreign on this tongue,  
bleeding out softly against a blanket  
of gold-drenched skin,  
gleaming like stars beneath sunlight.  
I cut it out of the sky and try to fit  
it inside me, fill the empty  
bullet holes from the past eleven years.  
It's the year of choosing myself:  
the first act is therapy, for the third time.  
Maybe this time I can carve the sad  
out of my body like a turkey on  
Thanksgiving, yank out the meat with  
my bare hands, all bloody and dripping.  
Body too empty with losing parts of me,  
I poured gasoline into my stomach  
to feel the burn of being alive.  
A barren soul with brown soil eyes,  
the colour of dirt and loneliness, I  
emptied the sky of its blue of bliss and  
held it between my teeth. It's lodged  
between the spaces of my ribs,  
sinking into a ghost town.  
The blue stains my teeth and tongue,

a splash of stars glittering in daybreak,  
a feathers weight settling.

JENNIFER AMMANN

*Numbers*

twenty-nine years from now

my thoughts will still            circle around

fever dreams and neuroscience

you adored the magic of fungi

so much you thought they were a cure

for kidney stones festering                            in a broken corpse

but i hang on to every syllable

that sprouts from your jaw

tell sunshine about the warmth                            of disease

you want me to sing            ave maria

for the love of your mother

returned favours            in mouldy yellow envelopes

my body is hollow

but not flexible enough            to bend            to zeus' will

when i leave

i heave goo out of my system

for sixteen fortnights

and tell others

i should have been more careful

that year

sleep through trauma  
until it refuses to dance        to the sound of your music  
any longer  
blame doesn't matter  
responsibility does  
admittedly  
i fall in love                        with every man  
who speaks of kindness  
struggling to mend cracked glass  
with late night kisses and wet promises  
that georgia o'keeffe  
would never approve of  
you call me three weeks later  
demand how I could write                        frosty white  
crystal poetry  
about your love  
violence was affection                and lessons  
my hair is finally growing back  
where you ripped it out  
asps hiss behind my ears  
eight out of nine times  
i crawl through depression  
on bloody elbows and knees  
when i reach the top of the volcano                i let go  
my fingers slip through lava

my lungs gasp for smoke  
as much as my tumour can take  
fall down 419 storeys  
pray to Poseidon                      for brotherly forgiveness  
IT WAS MUCH TOO LOUD                      that night  
i wanted to aid  
wrap my arms around your ribs  
or maybe  
the other way around  
i wanted to run                      the fibre of my lips  
along your endless spine  
for eight hours and forty-five minutes  
but resisted  
for nicety's sake  
dream of a boy  
who wears cannabis and long hair                      as cologne  
too close to hold my hand or aorta  
too far to crush them  
hide under                      sixty-five towels  
and count down the days  
shedding skin with every passing hour  
until my body melts into the mud  
and we become the void  
written on my soul  
  
i cried for a year

over you  
now my passion is dry  
deserted  
the thought of your face  
is nothing  
but a shallow pond  
in which i drown  
our children                      with sweet nightmares  
of care

it's like you missed  
my maitotoxin  
i used to write poetry  
about the burnt ends  
of your cigarettes  
dipped in lemon juice  
the words have gone stale  
they are no longer  
antidotal  
thanks to my sobriety  
for the first time in heartbreaks  
you told me the knots in my stomach  
were butterflies  
you did a line off the front page  
of your bible  
and told me  
that god  
doesn't approve  
of women like me  
what's worse  
i secretly got addicted  
to the sugar in your veins.

the season after,



i wake up  
the late september cherries  
go bitter in my mouth  
our history is rearranged in lines  
i can't calculate  
and what is left of the heat  
isn't enough  
to keep me warm.  
it doesn't feel  
like summer anymore.

MAHIMA ANJUM

*Sleep well*

Night, night I said, buried him deep inside with my bare hands  
Trying to run away from it all, I told everyone he's fine  
But everybody was blind, failed to understand.

I ran, far away from this sinful land  
But still, I couldn't forget this crime of mine  
Night, night I said, buried him deep inside with my bare hands

I travelled from Pakistan to Afghanistan  
I kept swallowing pills so I could get peace of mind  
But everybody was blind, failed to understand.

Evening came and I fell asleep on the sand  
Till I heard a child cry and whine  
Night, night I said, buried him deep inside with my bare hands

Surprised that I managed to succeed with my plan  
I sat there, thought for a while then smothered myself in wine  
But everybody was blind, failed to understand.

Rumours spread that officers finally knew of the man  
I was drowning in guilt, I think it's time  
Night, night I said, buried him deep inside with my bare hands

But everybody was blind, failed to understand.

## *What is love?*

They asked me what is love?

I replied love is cruelty,

Love is sadness,

Love is putting others before yourself,

Love is giving your heart and soul to someone only to watch them destroy it in the process.

They asked would you ever fall in love?

I laughed and then cried,

And told them that I had fallen in love and I am still in the process of it.

I told them that the love I had was not just seen through his eyes, but the things I did when he wasn't by my side.

I told them how I sacrificed my sleep only to pray his future would be bright and full of happiness.

I told them I couldn't sleep properly at night because thoughts of him came to mind.

They were left confused.

They asked me if he knew I loved him, I looked down and asked

What is love?

## *Power of words*

Words can show innocence

Words can show hate

Words can be used in so many ways.

Words can be black, gruesome and cruel

Words can be soft, mesmerizing and beautiful

Words have the power to uncover truths

But leave scars that can never recover.

Words can be positive, words can be negative

They can help make friendships and break them too.

OLIVIA APPLEBY

*Liar, liar*

Liar, liar,  
pants on fire  
but then you tell me the truth.

Don't tell me you love me  
then fuck your ex buddy  
and claim it just wasn't you.

With those tears in your eyes  
and knees on the floor  
you beg me to stay around.

I'll rip up your letter  
where you became such a beggar  
then pour your whiskey to the ground.

## *A love poem*

It's the hair that gets me going

no, the eyes

or the smile.

It's the way I'm told he missed me

when I've been away

for a while.

It's how he pulls me close

and holds me

in his embrace.

It's when he says 'I love you'

like I'd forgotten,

just in case.

*There for you*

silent moments

and dried up tears

i wish you'd open

and tell me those fears

what makes you sad

and hurts your heart

i'd be there for you

when you fall apart



MAHBUBA BEGUM

*City lights*

i've always had my doubts

who i'll be, can't I be any better?

this city is always moving

people are fading

cold air, sore hands

red bus never on time

friends are tired of waiting for me

one less year, then it's time to leave

my heart's vowed for tamer things

chapter closed; can it get any better?

classmates, forgotten names

my car tailgates for a better place

still the same

can't wait to leave

city lights have never been for me.

we've always wanted to be special

truth hurts, we've always been one dimensional

need an empty town to

match my views

city lights, stadium sights

never been for me

i just need my empty town tonight.

## *Helpless*

can't see it on your face  
you've always been distant  
you speak less than you used to  
but I see right through you

you were only ten,  
you said you were depressed.  
parents laughed it off  
and I think I did too.

fast forward to eighteen  
our friends have their dreams  
you say, 'what is there to pursue?'

the door to your room has always been shut  
late nights, phone calls  
how to help you?  
stressed and 'bound to die'

you are looking the wrong way  
it's hard to help,  
i was only gone for a moment.

don't want to step into your shoes

you said you haven't got much to lose

i'm sorry i haven't got much advice to give

fears can change, but mine has always been the same

don't want that phone call

i remember you said

'Sometimes I think I'm dead.'

What they say?

Voiced aloud

Scarred our skin

Would you repeat them again?

Deprived of what is said

Heard it all before

Feelings spared.

Ink on skin, a molten burn

'Are you a charity ward?'

No excuses anymore.

Envious of the clouds

They have it easy, no thought

or care from what I see

Use your words, not your voice

Comfort, now 'what's that?'

Dying inside

It all matches

Inside and out

Surrounded by shadows

Envied clouds

What they say?

Seeps through my skin

Never misses - stays

Attached like a limb

Though uncomfortable and uneasy.

No right intentions here.

## Birdcage

Wings clipped close  
For you to see  
I'm a spectacle  
Of the mirage I used to be,

Sanity was always lost  
Rain falls closer on me  
than the hands that never helped.

Walk past me as they do,  
hesitate to come close  
I used to think  
'me' and 'them' are the same,  
Realisation came as a duo with fear

August comes near  
December still so far  
A birdcage  
And I'm still here,

Hear them say 'it gets better'  
Though I'm still here, on the  
brink of insane

Do you know how bitter the metal  
of my cage tastes?



## Cautions

There's a tension with this detriment  
Always feeling unkept  
There's more to come on these mines  
Sun was better yesterday  
When it wasn't so displeased

They are all preying on me tonight,  
Standing by  
I hear them  
Though I don't see  
Lions are better in the stories when we sleep.

Petals on the ground,  
Looking back from where I used to stand  
I keep running, though my feet still hurt  
The moon follows me once again.

Snow hammers closer on me  
than the hands that never helped.  
Trees and snowflakes.  
Now flickers of notes that ring.

Always navigating

Carousels got the upper hand

Lights electrifying stars

## *Stressed*

This fair is a devout mess,

Nothing unwinds tension

I had these nightmares, but never slept.

MARYAM BEGUM

*20 years*

Young girl,

Be them!

Don't be you

That's not cool.

You're older now

Bolder,

Be you

So you do.

Young girl, follow.

Young women, lead.

Don't think —

Fit in

Don't fit in —

Think.

Insecurity masked,

Permission granted

Heal the wounds.

Not good enough,  
YOU are enough.

Not worth it,  
YOU are worthy.

Not really loved,  
YOU are loved.

Not believed in,  
I believe in YOU.

Spiteful thoughts kill —  
Self-compassion loves

Blame them,  
You're hurt.  
Forgive yourself  
Freedom awaits,  
Hurt bleeds.

Hate myself!  
An enemy?

Be kind!  
A friend?

Invalidated feelings

validate feelings.

Why are you weak?

Have you seen

her fire?

Quiet, no one cares!

Louder, so they hear.

Be polite!

Boundaries violated.

Disrespected.

Be polite!

Reinforce boundaries.

Resilience.

Young girl, chases

Her rejecters.

Young woman, embraces

Her supporters

Young girl begs

Them to stay.

Fear.

Young woman lets

Them go.

Courage.

Do they like ME?

Do YOU like you?

Dwells on her past,

Imprisoned.

Sails to the future,

Liberated.

Once a caterpillar,

Now a butterfly

Broken?

Never.

Wounded?

Yes.

Yet —

Whole

Forever.



## *Autumn*

Shadow buildings watch

Leaves whisper whilst conkers rest,

Moon embraces night.

## Crowd

Harmoniously,  
voices cheer and dissolve fast,  
in one gentle –  
breath.

SHUZNA BEGUM

*Colours*

Colours assume the faces  
of arctic blue  
of yellow and taffy pink  
tinges of green, pastel orange  
and  
violet

Colours assume the clothes  
tops of blue, neon green, yellow –  
jackets, and pink prints

A wave of arms float in  
the air  
dis –  
– persed amongst clouds of  
rainbow fumes

Fingers tangle and  
fade into the dust  
smiles settle on faces  
sometimes long  
wide  
curved

sometimes masked by  
fluorescent fog

The colour knows no sky  
it adopts any shape  
all forms

Amongst and within  
masses of people  
and crowds  
the colour is sky

ALYCIA BELL

*Mother sun and father moon*

Yet again, you've disturbed me. You know that I prefer the  
dark. Have you conversed with the moon? And whispered to  
the stars? Devising your plans, prodding me to my feet,  
twitching the curtains to lure me to sleep. Pushing the cars  
along the road and pulling the footsteps across the street.  
Burning holes in the woodwork; now, no choice but to see.  
Casting motion in hazed blindness to show I have sight.  
Irritate an ideal slumber so I put up a fight.

## *Little king, little king*

Little King, Little King, have you abused  
the power we give? Time to watch your  
kingdom fall. Your silence won't stop the  
whispers.

Little King, Little King, you don't live by  
what you parade. You dance like a clown  
shot in the foot and speak with the squeal  
of a pig.

If you dress a wound, Little King, in vibrant  
clothes and chuck ten-pound notes, it doesn't  
stop the pain it causes. It doesn't mean that we  
don't know.

Little King, you took the trust as hostage,  
Little King, you twisted vines in fresh hope.  
Got yourself caught in the trap. Got one foot  
free; one foot sinkhole.

Little King, Little King, I think it's time to  
give up your crown, give up the act and  
give the truth. Give up sick pride and  
sick prowl.

## *Scratch on the surface*

Dawn, nimble-fingered, awakes Horizon; Mounts skies above our solitary room.  
Honeydew of mist cascades down frozen; Hums a melancholy hymn; tuneful  
doom. The boy that I adore wakes in dull pains. The love we share lacks in its  
desire, He cries, I lie; tell him we're not to blame. I wonder if I put out the fire?  
Harsh downpours have caused my heart's erosion. Nothing but crumbs on this  
Earth as we gloom. Rage fuels poison in bangs of whispers, explosions, all in a  
minimization of zoom. We're a scratch on the surface, nothing more. The ground  
won't shudder if I slam the door.

*Goodbyes never farewell*

Reason with me, I'm capsized under the  
covers

rimming bottle lids, waiting for a call, looking  
for a sign.

Know me, my hasty change of disposition,  
dabbing a teary complexion, wrestling with  
restless nights.

Listen to me, it's the volume of truth,  
pulsating in your ear, racing around in your  
mind.

Look at me - my hands are clasped tightly,  
begging for a chance, wishing for more time.



## *Sonnet for the departing*

You'd take the beans and leave us penniless,  
rich in a hunger of magic and myth.

You'd weep in dismay when you saw your mess;  
I'd sniffle and salvage love from the tiff.

And your jester bells sing sharp in my ear  
but my ring finger repels at the thought.  
How you sing oblivious to my fear;  
make a garland out of flowers you caught.

Yet those flowers do blossom fragrantly.  
Regardless of our impoverished years,  
I know that you would love plentifully,  
count blessings in hysterics of tears.

If troubles should continue... let me be.  
A life of 'promises' means nothing to me.

*Predict the predator*

**Predict the Predator**

Little cub sips fresh breaths

separate from the pack.

Foreign to my land,

she moves to be feast.

Stalk her with an easy eye.

In my pride, what is the threat?

Invite myself to drink with her,

I gulp in careful ease.

Her paw stuck mid-motion,

knows no win but demise

bow my head, move aside.

Respect the chase in sight.

**Pray for the Prey**

*Fear the dense forest*

*and mountain shaped trees,*

*With dark foreboding figures.*

*The river is my light.*

*Darkness creeps closer,*

*he drinks beside me,*

*tongue rippling the water,*

*gaze focused on body.*

*No more sharp breaths.*

*In respect, he steps away,*

*The gap between us widens,*

*so I tread a little further.*

ANNE BLOMBACH

*What is feminism?*

what is feminism?

feminism is small tits

it's hairy armpits

it's clothes with loose fits

it's short hair

it's unaware

of the body in itself

feminism is shemale

it's sleeping with both male and female

and everything in between

feminism is hippie

it's trendy

it's up and coming

it's a biggie

feminism is loud

it's aggressive and offensive

it's shouting your opinions

what you are is intensive

comprehensive

hypertensive

or maybe, just maybe

you're crazy.

feminism is big tits

it's shaven armpits

it's clothes with tight fits

it's long hair and

it's aware

of the body in itself

feminism is female

or male

it's sleeping with whoever the fuck you want

it's unconventional

it's intentional

it's always there

it's dimensional

feminism is quiet

it's hidden and forbidden

it's a silent riot

it's guilt-ridden

what you are is afraid

betrayed

overworked and underpaid

or maybe, just maybe

you're normal.

feminism is inequality

it's everything about the 'she'

it's women in power

it's women are sour

it's women that tower

above men to make them little

above society to make it brittle

it's oppression

it's obsession

with succession over everyone else

no.

feminism is equality

it's everything about the 'we'

it's everyone in power

it's no one is sour

it's simple. we tower

above perceptions that are old

above what we are being told

it's freedom

feminism is crucial

it's annoying and amazing

it's destroying and appraising

it's full of love

it's full of life

it's what we need

we need to feed

it to our children

so they learn from our mistakes

and maybe, just maybe

make this world a better place.

RYAN BRYCE

*Nothing too dramatic just a mirror of frosted glass*

a blind glass

frosted privacy

you cannot see me

no you do not have an appointment

everything must be secretive

you are a better door than a window

my father

used to say that

never had a clear window

to me when i was a child

ahead of him

maybe that's why he had his ear pierced or i never saw him cry

(go ask your mother)

maybe that's why i have to wait

until i'm alone

to let off an exhaust of tears

i have always dreamed of frosted glass with nameplates

nothing too dramatic just a mirror of frosted glass

you'd need to squint awfully hard

but you might just be able to see me

hopefully hopefully i'm still breathing

nothing too dramatic just a mirror of frosted glass  
maybe it's all the smoke

you can tell me to quit all you like  
you're wasting your breath like i'm wasting mine  
you savage                      you blind fuck

(go ask your mother)

can i borrow your lighter?

(go ask your mother)

go home

come home

(go ask your mother)

please



## *Catworth, west cambridgeshire*

you could've chosen the airport's hustle. the noise  
flying over green to blue to green to turquoise  
to blue again. you chose not to.

you could've been red in green. you chose not to.

you chose a snail tripping on cobbled pavements  
and a post office and a morning salute and a five mile radius  
pub crawl with three pints of craft danger  
and the fourth pint drank amongst the rangers.

and a pool table still takes you back to ninety-three  
where old mick smith and you would smile with glee  
and cheap jokes and a glorious trophy dusty  
with the fear of bringing up kids and getting rusty.

and you'd do the books and set the cot  
in the corner of the room and that's your lot.  
that's your life. that's your schedule.  
and i'd be in bed at seven because that's your rule.

and now i can still drive down by church road  
and beckon a thanks to the gard'ner who mowed  
the grass outside the racehorse inn  
and act like remembering childhood's a sin.

but i have small memories of small memories  
of a foggy cot, a misty garden, shrouded trees,  
and the more i remember the things that linger,  
the more the naughty noughties slip through my fingers.

you try recalling your childhood. try to remember  
when the heat of your love struck embers  
try to describe how seeing the world  
at four foot two decided to unfurl

itself to you. it's a hopeless endeavour  
the more you concentrate. the less that you remember.  
the less you want. the more you need.  
the more you crave. the more you plead.  
the less you ask. the more you get.  
the more you cry. the less you fret

about your family, about the diary you wish you wrote.  
you wanted evidence to feeling but you choked  
on your own tongue, left the tasteless emotion  
tumbling through the sky in slick slow motion.

so now you're short changed. you're at a loss.  
you picked heads and tails and lost the toss.  
you wanted turquoise, and red, and green, and blue

but the black and white of us is only addressed to you.

## Home

i never feel at home in that bed.

no cataclysm,

no sickly synthesiser,

no plastic happiness

crying behind my eyes.

i could flex my hips a little,

dance across the room,

flotsam arms, heavy like chains,

i am never home anymore -

except in front of the bathroom sink,

or when fingernails rake

through my hair

(mine or yours).

NICOLE BUTLER

*Time's shrine*

Where does it go, that funny thing called time?  
It leaves without a notice, arrives with no invite,  
it can leave you in the shadows, committing the perfect crime.

Fallen silent throughout the years, the body's mime,  
following the sun, up early and bright,  
where does it go, that funny thing called time?

Tread carefully on this earth for this is its shrine.  
Treat it wrong, and watch it cast a permanent night  
on loved ones, on you, committing the perfect crime.

Do not forget that it is your lifeline,  
whatever you do, don't let it leave your sight.  
You cannot earn it back, that funny thing called time.

It will slip through your fingers like slime,  
no matter how much you try to fight,  
it's smarter than you, it knows the perfect crime.

I am enemies with it, it took what was mine,  
it took what I loved, out of spite,  
I wait for it to take me, to end my time,

to be with my beloved, to end the perfect crime.

## *Humanity's reminder*

I have no purpose on this painting.  
My being accidental, a piece of evidence  
of time passing, reminding humanity  
how fast time leaves.  
People stare as they walk past,  
they whisper how it is  
'such a shame' that me and my brothers exist.  
They wish to know a time before my being.  
But I am a battle scar,  
an added dimension to the story that continues.

## *Nature's chiromancer*

I am a chiromancer,  
I can read my own palm.  
The lifeline shows me  
the end is near, the scars  
remind me of my journey,  
remind me of the creatures I met.  
The love line shows me,  
this lover will hold on  
until the very end.  
Look at the yellow,  
the last patch of colour,  
the sun has kissed his last  
kiss on my palm.  
I am a chiromancer,  
I can read my own palm.  
This is my last line.



Focus and you'll notice the silent murmurs of love

It's in the way the moon fades every night to let the sun illuminate each day

It's in the piercing breezes that cause rosy cheeks

It's in the flirty leaves that caress your skin as autumn demands them to fall

It's in the kiss of dawn's light as it calls the world awake

It's in the mystery of fog as it puzzles your vision into a haze

It's in the sunshine that spirals within romantic clouds

It's in the fresh wind of winter that storms summer away

It's in the smouldering stars that tease the night

It's in the mosaic of colours that blooms in the smiling sky

It's in the whispers of tree branches that spill secrets

It's in the darkness of shadows that dance dangerously

It's in the winking snowflakes that laugh with the cold

Love murmurs silently but it murmurs everywhere

## Snapshot

An image of an isolated girl, staring bleakly at the naked walls

An image of one who's barely there, eating her own thoughts

An image of mere existence, all colour trickling out

An image of a void, devouring sadness from the air

She smiles so brightly, her skin screams

She laughs so lightly, her eyes stream

An image of a dreary ocean, submerging itself

An image of waning light, dissolving into darkness

An image of a tired soul, cradling worries that are heavier than her

An image of profound blue, shedding tired tears

Oh, what an image

An image that no longer lives

## *Entangled*

Weaving footprints on the hardened ground -

Different plots embracing

Like colourful fabrics intertwining

*A moment*

Midnight clouds are sighing again,

As chilly skies arise

And vanquish the warmth

## *Wishing*

The deadly wind whispers,  
And winter lungs dream  
Of satin sunshine

*Alive*

Reborn leaves flame to the ground

In the weakening summer sun as

The awakening moon revives

Curious things they are,  
Delicate, each whispering a song,  
Some were warm, kind and bright,  
Not showcasing anything wrong,  
Portraying a vision of sweet sight...

Others shivered with icy cold,  
Making them a fancy bold,  
Shedding out no light,  
Battling a losing fight...

A mixed group, full of different hues,  
Some dripped yellow with happiness,  
A few were a colourful, sappy mess,  
Others were tainted with the saddest blue,  
There were ones tinged with death too...

Quiet, reserved and dark,  
Branded by an eternal mark,  
Crying out heartbreak as they glanced up,  
They moved away from my touch,  
Held in an impenetrable, draining clutch...

Some twinkled with a burning desire to consume,

Sparkling luminous in the haunting abyss,  
Containing a powerful need to bloom...

Others shone blue, black and red,  
Fizzling out on their lonely bed...



MICHAELA CORCORAN

*Rambo*

I don't like flowers,

I put them on some poor old sod's belly and think it'll do them no good.

My old man didn't like lilies,

he liked hot Irish whiskeys and a cold tin of beer from the fridge,

betting slips and nicotine stained teeth.

People give me strange looks as I decorate his pauper's grave with empty bottles,

they seem to wink at me as they catch the light,

or it could just be the amber liquid that sets my insides on fire.

And I know he would have preferred cigarette butts to pushing up daisies,

but every time I get back they're gone, like his plot isn't an ashtray-

so I buy roses and poppies and carnations.

Your grave looks just like everyone else's now, you'd hate it.

I don't like flowers because they just wither up and die,

and couldn't the same be said about people?

ELENA DEMIREVA

*I want my time with you*

we travel

and in the growl of train engines

in the rattle as the plane takes off

in the moments we wait

in the spaces between

i want my time with you

## Daddy left

daddy left.

i remember the phone call,  
the empty, unfurnished room,  
all the *I miss yous*

the anger in my young soul,  
the guilt, the shame,  
how I never missed him,  
how he could never stay.

My own flesh and bone,  
Blood, family and all.  
My regret, my empty tree,  
my no one, not for once, not at all.

CHELSEA EMMETT

*Things i should probably say but don't*

*pt. one –*

(for O)

you are my friend,

i'm sure of it.

you take too much and rarely ever give,

but i spend my life in your company,

most days anyway.

i don't like to think of you,

when i'm by myself.

the thought of you frustrates me,

in the way that unsaid insults from past arguments,

frustrate the aggressor.

you, who pushes and pushes and pushes,

you, who makes me feel inadequate

and angry,

who does not care for others,

when your feelings are on the line.

i hate you sometimes, you know?

i hate you so much that i've become addicted to our lifestyle.

to the late night talking,  
and the way you whisper so harshly  
about people who consider you a friend.

and it would be idiotic of me  
to assume that you didn't whisper about me,  
to a person who you whisper to me about.  
but that is what you are,  
and you are still my friend.

*pt. two -*

(for R)

it took three cups  
of the spiked punch,  
for me to become loose.  
sweet blissfulness -  
intoxication at its best.

i spend the night  
in the company of family.  
not family of blood,  
but family of choice.  
i am a fool,  
for the things i said

i can never take back,  
only apologise.

you are there,  
my family,  
my friend.

with your ebony locks  
- are you going to lose your hair?  
my thoughts are jumbled,  
and this is something  
that i cannot let myself speak.

i take you home,  
dropping our other friend off on the way.  
i make a fool of myself in the car,  
you sit in the middle,  
close to me,  
as i spill my dirty secrets,  
my aspirations,  
my dreams.

you describe yourself as broken,  
i remember that clear as day.  
i deny it,  
as i lean my forehead against yours,  
for you are so strong,

that your cracks hardly show.

you leave the car,  
just to get in another  
to go to some other party,  
where you'll be able to forget  
just for a little while longer.  
but i can't forget,  
don't be selfish, don't be selfish.

too late,  
it breaks,  
and i begin to sob.  
i sit next to my mother,  
as you drive away.  
'i don't know what to do if she dies'  
is the cry from my lips.  
and my mother,  
my dear sweet mother,  
grabs my hand and holds it tight.

the pain is intense,  
it's not something i have felt before.  
it's a soul splitting kind,  
and i rest one hand on my stomach,  
and another on my mouth,

in a weak attempt to keep my soul in.

breathing becomes difficult,

i feel selfish again,

because what about the pain you go through?

what about everything you feel?

you always joke about others being in denial,

but it's never felt more real than it has now,

when my heart is in my hands,

bleeding,

and my lungs feel like they're shrinking.

in two days time it'll be Monday,

and you will never know of this,

but i feel like my optimism is shaking,

and my faith isn't as strong as it was before.

*pt. three*

(for S)

i love you,

not like the deep affection between partners,

or in the tenderness of a mother,

but in the way a sister worships a sister,



if i can imagine what that should feel like.

but i hate the way that you're ignorant in your actions,  
how you talk and talk and talk  
with no regard for others.  
you are above -  
we are below.

times like this,  
you make me realise how hard my mother tries;  
to help me and to hold me,  
to just be close to me.  
it makes me feel sick that i push her away so easily,  
and let myself ever forgive you.

it makes me feel selfish,  
the indescribable feeling  
of knowing i'm a selfish person,  
and i don't know the difference between feeling genuine emotions,  
or if i'm just trying to convince myself -  
am i worth more than i actually am?

you are the numbness,  
the tired emotions  
that struggle to keep up,  
you are the cause and the solution,

all at once.

*An approach to a match*

Strike a match,

in an instant,

the world is bright and loud and inexplicably large,

it's bursting with life, sound, sight—

The flame goes out,

in an instant.

Nothing.

Darkness.

## Regret

It tastes bitter, like cough syrup,  
or like lemons when you have sores in your mouth.

It smells like burnt rubber,  
and a familiar perfume that has nearly faded.

It sounds like old arguments that have been left unsaid,  
the same tune playing over and over again.

It feels like the jagged edge of a broken glass,  
it's rough and coarse and  
it washes over you, surrounds you

smothers you.

It's all consuming and unforgiving.

time

of

A quiet beauty, transcendent

A soft, subtle rouge painted on supple lips

*Blood or pomegranate juice?*

The tenebrous hand of Hell seducing,

tempting,

enticing.

Four, five, six seeds.

One last look towards the light,

then

only the dusk.

TEREZA VICTORIA FIALOVA

*Our universe*

Sometimes is just enough

Enough things to do

Enough stress

Enough love

Enough lying

Enough people, enough artificial mess

Enough boring work

Enough identical days

Not enough personal battery

To distress

To charge from for new 'enoughs'

In that us humans lose

Little space in our own universe

Where all the things

We hanker for are

Our dreams are here to save us

Give us the reason to move

To finish

To start

To not give up

Our self-made drug

The opium

Both to be

Harmless and harmful

If humans have the dream

The catchers of our breakdowns

The stoppers

The connections

The servants

The unbreakable train to our goals,

Limitless and free

Without the fee

Yet the cost of time

Thankfully those dreams

You and I Both of us

Humans, we

Can break the Wall of stereotype

'Keep you alive' rhythm

Day by day

Night by night

From eight to twelve

Once again

It is like to skate

Barefoot on ice

Sharp knife feeling

On our way to dreamland

All those eyes

You meet

You look into

They all hide in their little Universes

Archer pointing

Inside your mind

Where do you see

The real you

Imagine first

Building up slowly

In our absurd world

Oh God, how free

You are now

When you know

That there is no limit

Ever there be



To your limitless capacity of dreams

EMILY FISHER

*Eviction notice*

Each day a conflict to emerge from a

dark,

dark,

dark place –

place.

A place from a lifetime ago that would be

better,

better,

better to forget –

forget

Forget how long, deeply, I've struggled inside my

own,

own,

own head –

head

My head, my life, allowed another person to make it

home,

home,

home instead –

instead.

*'Honey, don't look'*

Concrete steps

raise

concrete towers

White bed sheets

cling

to dead summer flowers

A bike hangs

listlessly –

from a top-floor balcony

## *Stars and stones*

The wind whispers  
& tree limbs moan.  
Naked bodies,  
hearts of stone  
reach out &  
dance with one another.

Climb inside each other,  
share your thick skin.  
Bones inside bones,  
minds losing minds.

Forget what is lost in you  
& melt into night.  
Beneath the same stars – sway.  
From these same stars our body is made.

## August

August arrives,

alive –

For miles, I see,

& I come to you,

scratched ankles

& muddy knees.

Up fell

through fern,

& grandeur of green,

I drink heartily,

what is left for me.

## *The last clove cigarette*

We surrender fireflies  
from their glazed zoo,  
just as dawn's flushing  
cheeks begin to glow

Wings whir, deep  
in delicious darkness,  
& to this gentle thrum  
our soft souls vanish

Silently, we slip under  
clouds of heady scent,  
carnation, lily, lily, rose,  
the last clove cigarette

Alive, take flight now,  
through knee high grass  
& wild summer flowers,  
to the song of coyotes  
and rhythmic cicadas

Bitter droplets fall heavy,  
snarling hair, glazing faces,  
parting hands, brief embraces

A broken heart  
comes in stages.

They rush up  
& pour back down.  
Untidy, dirty

Click

Click

Click

Against buckteeth.  
They are formed,  
but never released.



## Farewell

on this, the darkest night,  
a delicate veil of water  
falls &  
from black eyes  
come thundering lies  
to the rhythm of farewell

the last cigarette of love  
is absent blood  
embers.

me, absorbing  
you  
your black coffee liquid air

smoke dances gracefully  
six years feel hazy  
forlorn fingertips reach  
lost  
vacant space seized by wind

deceive conceal reveal delete  
iridescent sidewalk gasoline  
true colours at the  
end

a delicate veil of waterfalls  
on this, the darkest night.

## *Sea Swept*

And how terrific it would be to

visit you one more time

The rose bush at your door

that smelt of the nearby sea

You were always waiting

A custard cream and milky tea

Your hand on mine

mine nestled in yours

We'd lull the afternoon away

On black and white keys

You

the roses

and the sea

MEGAN FITZGERALD

*Tides*

Your body -  
delicate and innocent  
like alabaster sand  
unwashed by the sun.

Say surrender.  
To the waves against the shore  
beating. in and out  
a rhythm of their own creation.

Temperatures arise,  
as you bathe in the waters provided.  
Slender fingers explore  
forbidden caves.

Pink seashells -  
nipples your only anchor  
against an oncoming tide.

Pushing against pebbles.  
higher and higher till  
white foam over rocks.

An unhindered storm hits.

## The life of joking

It's a joke- that's all

Pure and simple,

A joke about you,

Written in the joys of your nest.

A joke that started before the eggshell broke.

And restarted at the tender age of seven.

It wrote itself in black marker—

langer lines, their true compass.

It's a joke that left the mirror shattered.

A joke that continues through the years.

A joke of smeared lipstick,

A joke that ended with black salty lines.

It started with your family—

*yo mamma, yo daddy -*

A joke that left inner tears for wolves to enjoy.

*It's just a joke, don't worry.*

It moved on - the joke twisting with your age.

A joke that preyed upon your fears.

A joke that ate your confidence—

Sweet strawberry pie.

A joke that made you sick.

left wishes for a body suited to page 3 .

A joke that left an illusion of yourself.

Hateful and true.

It's all a joke that ends with, *No offence.*

## *White ravens*

Raise your hands  
to the words of the Almighty.

You hear the chatter  
but you don't hear what's coming.

The countdown begins  
hidden behind words of revival.

10..9..8..  
Till the white raven comes.

Your hymns continue the count,  
7..6..5..

You feel protected by white walls.  
You're false happy on a frozen lake.  
Surrounded by prayers of new life.

4..3..2..1..

Surrounded by white static,  
Your white walls evaporate.  
Silent ringing bells



of mourning

on the horizon.

I count count count

The kisses the hugs the laughs the looks

The jokes the words the drinks the friends

The time between

They look away

I get a negative

So I count count count

The bread the plum the soup the oat

The jogs the steps the time it takes

To lose a bit of me

I get a negative

So I don't count

Instead

I crave crave crave

The sweet the fat the chocolate and fries

The sex the yes the dance the play

A lot

Too much

I count the bites of my lunch

And then I count the times I repeated a sentence in my head until I lost the chance to say it out

loud

I divide it by the number of tears of my last panic attack

So then I have to multiply it by the calories from my next meal

Count count count

I'm lost

I don't know if I have a negative or a positive anymore

So I'll stop

Completely

Just don't

At all

From 6 till 6

Zero from 18 till 6

Zero is safe

Multiply it by how much you want

Zero is safe

But unfortunately I only managed zero from 6 till 2

That gives you -4

So I'll subtract it from my morning coffee

Change. small cup into a large and I get a negative

Then I can add all the times I embarrassed myself this week

And maybe just maybe

I'll get a positive

Count count count

But a positive means fat

It means too big and cellulite and disproportionate figure

And it means I'm gonna have to count the sweat drops the next time I go to the gym

Along with all the times I insulted myself this morning

And the number of grams of the apple I ate even though I shouldn't

Count count count

I'm tired

So I'll count the hours of sleep

Or I'll just stop counting

Completely

But then the times I wake up in terror at night multiply

Because the one thing I must never add is kilograms

*But my parents are mathematicians*

*So maybe I got it from them*

## A minute

At one second I send a text:

'I don't think they even know who I am'

But I want you

At 20 seconds I'm ecstatic

'Come join me'

I send, this time to you

At 30 seconds I come over

But I've written to many poems about this

already...

At 40 seconds we talk

You open up to me

*'You pull me under'*

But give me no time to open up to you

*'push me over with no time*

*to push back'*

At 50 seconds I overthink

Everything, and I'm exhausted

But I want you

At 60 seconds you are gone

And I am still here

But I want you

At 60 249 seconds you are still gone

I am still here

I still want you

A minute was too short

But I am drained

A minute was too long

But how could I have known?

*You shouldn't have*

You shouldn't have kissed my forehead  
I'm pressing fingers into the corners of my eyes  
You shouldn't have held me  
I shouldn't have looked at your chin from that angle  
Or listened to your heartbeat  
I shouldn't have grinned to myself in the bathroom  
We shouldn't have locked fingers  
I shouldn't have whispered  
Or clenched to you  
Or touched your hair  
Wrap my legs  
Say your name  
Text my friends  
Love your laugh  
Arch my back  
Scratch your arms  
Tell my mom  
Think the thoughts  
Do the things  
You shouldn't have  
I'll dig my fingers deeper into the eye corners now  
Till they claw my brain  
Till you're not there  
Because I never should have looked at your chin from that angle

ELEANOR FREEMAN

*Black dog song rewritten*

I know I am grey because the world is grey too  
And I blend with the grey of the world that I know  
And the grey clouds above look like they are pearls  
And the grey garden grass looks like wet, writhing eels  
And the lampposts are grey, with the flowers tied round  
That wilt and are grey, all their colours spilt out  
They are grey like the garden, come from the garden  
That gets its grey from the grey pearly clouds



'She died,'  
Mum said. I hardly blinked.  
I don't think anybody cried.

She came and sat beside  
me but I didn't think  
it mattered much that 'She died.'

I really should have tried  
to say something meaningful, to speak  
at all but I don't think a single person cried.

Now I look back, I'm sure mum lied,  
'She wanted to go, she'd been sick,  
she lived a good life before she died.'

But what excuse is that? To hide  
the fact that in a blink  
her life was gone, and no one cried.

I felt bad but still denied  
the chance to cry, I think  
it would have been fake, even though 'She died'.  
I didn't know her well enough to cry.

## *Hadleigh castle*

Crumbled walls to house this springs chick's  
and a sky for them to fly in.

Seagull castle,

the place of lords

now sinks below the saltwater marshes.

Waves trip over the shore

wearing frills as white

as the fledgling's feathers.

ALEKSANDRA GATZ

*One more minute*

every morning i try to live  
but instead i feel like dying

each bone weighs tonnes  
skin melts into the bed  
brain creates a disruptive circle  
of the same endless thoughts  
over and over and over again  
praying to be unconscious  
for at least a little bit longer

a second changes into a minute  
a minute changes into a dozen  
a dozen changes into an hour  
and if i am lucky enough that day  
an hour does not change into hours

somehow the bed releases my body  
and somehow, i release my bed  
just to get through one more day

preparing myself for the next morning  
knowing i am strong enough to live

*I laugh and nod my head*

they say i am a mess

i laugh and nod my head

*they say i am a mess*

breaking glasses in the deck

*they say i am a mess*

always falling down the stairs

*they say i am a mess*

rapidly talking with no sense

*they say i am a mess*

always late and unprepared

*they say i am a mess*

losing my phone in every place

*they say i am a mess*

blindly searching for my friends

*they say i am a mess*

spilling coffee on my hands

*they say i am a mess*

i laugh and nod my head

*i laugh and nod my head*

as my eyes are filled with pain

as overthinking drives me insane

as i try to survive the day again

*i laugh and nod my head*

as racing thoughts crush my brain

as i try to control my shaking hands

as the only way out is to escape

*i laugh and nod my head*

as i compose letters just in case

as i feel stressed and overwhelmed

as my only comfort is time with friends

*they say i am a mess*

*i laugh and nod my head*

## *The future*

i used to be scared of the future  
i cried from the helplessness  
lying in my bed for many days  
i could not feel any of my muscles  
i could not move any of my bones

crying was replaced by numbness  
i was staring at one spot for hours  
trying not to think  
at the same time  
trying to remember how

my eyes were empty  
there was no hope.  
my mouth was shut  
there were no words.  
my body was dying  
there was no reason.

i was scared of the future  
i preferred not to have one

i choose how to kill myself

i choose to do it slowly

i choose to watch myself dying

smoke running through my body

filling up the space in my lungs

until there is no air left to breathe

filling up the space in my mind

until there are no more thoughts

filling up the space

until there is no me

my body is slowly shutting down

still not giving up on the world

at the same time tired of living

my mind is full of goodbye letters

i am not scared of the rapid end

i am scared of what is left after

i choose cigarettes

nobody realizes

i choose to die

*dear friends*

you are the luxury i feel i do not deserve  
each day i try to make myself worthy  
i give you all of me piece by piece  
until there is no me left

*dear friends*

saying you are like family would be wrong  
you mean so much more than that  
you make my eyes laugh  
i feel peaceful again

*dear friends*

you feel like the drugs and i am an addict  
each day you save me from numbness  
i wish i owned you like you own me  
until it feels right

*dear friends*

saying i love you would not be enough  
you are the air i need for breathing  
you are the light that leads me  
i feel like whole again



*dear friends,*

*thank you*

MONIKA GENOVA

*Eight minutes of light*

*For Danny*

It will take about a day for  
the ripples of a handful of pills  
to travel through space and reach him.  
Vibrations of the phone, sitting  
on the table, of the voice carried over  
from the other end will put in motion  
five stages of emotions until his life  
settles to stillness again,  
as if I was never there.

Eternity exists in the span of that day,  
outside the measures of time and space,  
beyond gravity and relativity,  
sitting in a chair on the balcony  
with a cup of tea.

\*

She made me do it.  
I named her Joey.

A severely dyslexic person

might spell 'okay' like that,  
and that's not okay, but it is.

How else do I explain it?

Joey lives with me. She tells me  
what to do sometimes and I talk  
about it with him. He tells me not  
to do it. Joey raised her voice at me  
and when I woke up I could hear  
a man shouting at the police and  
someone typing on their phone  
and the beeping of machines.

If it's cold outside, I don't know  
anything about it. That's not how  
the laws of physics work. Ripples  
go outwards – inside the core is still  
and quiet and empty.

I don't pay for it. Other people pay  
for me. I don't say 'sorry' because  
words don't mean anything. They  
get swallowed by the waves of  
blood coming out of a 0.5mm wide  
piece of metal stuck inside my vein.

\*

I sit awake in the waiting room;  
the woman, not wearing scrubs  
wants to talk to me about Joey.  
She made me do it. I'm not sorry.

They don't understand the words I say  
when I try to explain that six  
is my favourite number. Five white round  
and one pink oval and a glass of ouzo and  
then another one. Colours are important.  
Aesthetically pleasing ends are almost  
as good as happy, Joey said.

It will take eight minutes for the light  
to go out, for the unlucky one to race  
against time, against biology,  
against chemistry, and an open bottle  
of ouzo. Joey sits in the chair with  
a cup of tea, watching me as I  
struggle to breathe. I don't hear  
and I don't see. A man argues with  
the police in broken English.

\*

'Skintact' is not a word, but it is

made of letters, which are red and  
stick to my skin. They're not aesthetic:  
they're maroon and white and the tubes  
are blue and nothing is pink anymore.  
I think of pink things every time  
the machine beeps: fingernails,  
cheeks, ribbons, lips, birds, letters,  
baby kangaroos, oval-shaped pills.

'Do you know how many people  
love you? Your life is of enormous  
value.' His words rhyme and my  
mind can only handle one thing  
at a time – the correspondence of  
sounds between words at the end  
of his sentences. He didn't mean it.  
It just happened. 'I didn't mean it.'  
I lied. He knows I lied. He knows  
that Joey speaks louder than him  
sometimes. He sticks around anyway.

## *Kinetic energy*

A hamster taught me how to ride a bike  
by drawing charts and formulas  
of 9.80665 newtons of force  
per kilogram of mass, multiplied  
by an infinity of time. He said  
I was not allowed to stop:  
to stop means to fall. Protective  
gear is too heavy to carry  
day in and day out. He doesn't  
mind if I cry, as long as I keep  
cycling: left, right, left, right.

In stone cold anger  
you push another dagger  
between my vertebrae  
crippling beyond reasonable doubt  
any chance I ever had  
of holding my head high.  
As if walking in your sleep  
you take your steps casually  
through gardens of freesia  
and sandcastles - careless,  
accustomed to the sound of  
breaking under your feet -  
anything to fill the silence.  
Blind to the bruises on my  
mind left by your fists - justified  
surely by the injustice of life  
and the social gaps within  
families like ours that don't go  
on holidays.

## *Pink spotted*

Spots of pink between the blue and yellow,  
green and purple of my skin,  
tell tales. I fill in the blanks with fiction  
when someone asks questions.  
Don't you rush declaring your love for me,  
not until you know the whole story.  
I can turn around to bite you in the ass,  
trust me. Don't go telling me  
you like it. Everything in good time,  
honey. Learn my favourite colour  
first. What do I like to eat  
in the morning? 'Me', you say,  
trying to be funny. I shake my finger at you:  
'Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.'

Pink doesn't always mean happy things.  
Spotted like a Pollock from the fifth  
metacarpal to the wrist; before you  
reach to hold my hand, make up your mind -  
is it worth the blood stains?  
There's dirt under my nails and trace  
evidence of resilience. I'll ask you nicely  
to contain your impatience. I won't ask  
twice. I'll sparkle for you like the roaring



twenties, given the time to go through  
the one, two and three. Skipping steps  
will only leave you pink.

If my rhymes make no sense to you, take  
my word for it - fiction is worth reading  
mostly for what comes after it.

Walls

The Walls draw me closer into their grasp.  
Stifles, engulfs, infiltrates my space  
each step, my thoughts, every move I make.  
I struggle to breathe; to find the air my body craves.

A vicelike grip, firm, fervent hold  
I question how they can be so bold.  
Physically, mentally, emotionally  
they own me.

I hear the voices of the walls mocking, calling  
their whispers, gradually breaking me down.  
I am falling, slowly... slowly... I can't help but listen.  
I am a prisoner of these Walls.

Dirt ridden rotting barriers, cracks are embedded  
they are alive, in my mind.  
Entangled webs, yearning for my sanity  
as I lie            lonely            on my isolated bed

Sneering, they challenge me. It is a battle.  
Reigning champions in a ring,  
as my nerves begin to rattle, I hear the *DING*

I am the underdog. The fight begins.

I begin to count, crack by crack.

Each fine line, engraved in the walls

I am a contender, but will I fall.

Dominantly the crack glares. I will fight back.

A gaping hole appears, intensifying my fears

as an earthquake divides my two worlds.

I am on the side of solitary, freedom is the opposition.

as it slips away into the partitioned earth.

A pounding reverberates within my being.

Forcefully offensively, banging

at the door to my heart. An unexpected visitor.

My strength enters, my fear departs.

Steadily the cracks begin to close,

defiant determination overcomes.

I feel free, I am free – partially.

The fight is not over yet.

In my mind, my own voice speaks,

*'continue your fight do not be defeated'*

In my solemn and bleak enclosure,

silently, I begin to answer.

I will contest this fight.

Solitary and solitude will not break me.

It is an assault, a test I must pass  
and make my statement I will at last

Initiate change, greet the unwelcome injustice  
that hammered at my teenage door.

I will not be conquered,  
I pick my body up off the floor.

Days, nights, weeks, months, years  
are repetitive within these walls.

We silently argue, these walls and I  
a subdued fight, soundlessly I cry.

Redemption finally arrives

Physically, I am free.

No longer is this my home

The walls continue to whisper, scowling at me

As they dare me to leave

I say a heavy goodbye.

to what is and has been

my enemy.

As I walk, step by step  
physically I am going,      going                      gone.  
Through wrought, rusting gates out of the darkness  
I have done no wrong.

But mentally I am left behind  
within the barriers of the Walls remains my mind.  
It is over - fractionally, my body is free,  
but my sanity does not follow me.

solitary confinement won the fight.

NAOMI GREEN

*My poetry teacher told me to write a love poem*

My mornings hurt all summer,  
Until you started playing with my hair  
In time to the birds.  
Don't take the piss,  
But I'm excited to be alive at 7am,

Watching you work out which one is the moisturiser.  
I can make something of myself on these mornings.  
It's trickier when I'm back on the train.

Inviting forest.  
My favourite spot to clear my head.  
Protective and dangerous, whichever I ask for.

Darkness drops.

I can't stay too long,  
I'll see figures that were never there,  
And keep running back to the same trees.

I wasn't even looking for a shag,  
But they sent me a soul mate.  
You must be the one

All the love songs promised.

Striking swan.

Serene,

With all of the answers

Shining,

despite the muddy waters.

But if I'm brave enough

To lower my head underwater,

I'll find thrashing,

Searching.

The swan is just like me.

Or are you an unlucky black cat?

Scratching deep,

But only because you're searching,

For a warm sofa,

Away from the rain.

We fight with FORCE.

But when it's finished

The breeze tiptoes in,

Apologetic,

Carefully drying,

Until everything looks new.

Then he shouts:

'let's gibbidy go.'



CHRISTY GUICHARD

*The girl by the window*

The girl by the window, of this small coffee shop,

The smell of the dark roast fills the air, full

Roast in my espresso, to keep my mind awake.

The girl by the window, the only other person here,

Bitterness on my tongue lingers with every sip, soft

My muffin for breakfast, made today freshly baked.

The girl by the window, your coffee almost gone,

Empty cup in front of me, time to start my day, bright

Sun's rays pierced the windows, moving towards her golden eyes.

The girl by the window, you start to get up to leave,

Am I ready? Should I leave? Follow her to a new life, comfort

From my hot drink, the solitude of my own company I bide.

The girl by the window, about to walk away,

I get up from my chair and move towards her, 'Wait!'

She holds the door open for me, looks towards me and smiles.

The girl in front of me, there's something I must ask,

'Would you like to have coffee with me?' silence

Before broken by a 'yes, I see you every morning, I've liked you for a while'

Us by the window, conversation strong, decaf weak,

Another cup of happiness, I was finally brave enough to speak.

*Ya rasool Allah (oh messenger of God)*

And his beauty can be  
Said to be Absolute  
Not finite to his  
physical attributes  
But universally concurred  
With the greatness of his  
character  
The softness of his  
heart,  
and the magnanimity of  
his actions

He is AlHabib\*

Grandness of nature  
resides within him.

And I, being me  
Can only swim along the  
Shoreline  
Which only has given me  
A fuller appreciation of his ocean's depth.

\*the beloved in Arabic

Maybe you are more honest  
than the last ocean  
all salt and sea  
a place of depth

Ask what's more  
important  
sweet or bitter  
Love or air?

Sing them back to me  
word by word  
until your heart forgets  
all its failings

Maybe forgiveness sounds  
more like a river  
Yet you find yourself  
drowning in it.

*My lord*

Countless time I fall, in the wrath of despair

Over and over, until my bones cannot bear.

That's why they say misery loves company.

It leaves no room for sympathy

And all that lingers on is pain and agony

But I ask my Lord to bestow upon me goodness. For surely he is the only one that provides me with wholeness.

*And thus*

They say love is as inconstant as the moon,  
A trick to be played and a game to be fooled by.  
But I slipped past the  
finish line I drew with shaky hands.

and those sweet words that flowed through your mind, from your lips  
Were they as constant as the waterfall?

and the smell of blood  
on my knuckles and  
the taste of citrus vodka  
in my mouth.

Were they pockets full of stardust?

But yet, I forget,  
I am more balance than burn

Call it a sacrament.

My single word shaped,  
into a single weapon.

How hallow does this air feel

Without you by my side,

Till dusk, you're still here.

The mist of your presence

Nowhere near but here.

And I watch the stars with my eyes closed

While the rain pours down that makes me think

The end is perhaps worth reaching.



CIARAN KELLY

*Elastic heart*

I walk along the canal,  
And in my mind, you tell me  
A joke as the sun folds into your hair,  
Your ghost holds my hand and my elastic  
Heart is pulled to worlds I've never seen, you  
Hold the strings in your fingers to squeeze my  
Ghost.

We shattered each other's worlds,  
Worlds secure and fragile as eggs and I broke yours first,  
Your dimmed shelter,  
Your quiet, nurturing world with no clue to a life outside,  
And you in turn,  
Drove jagged pieces into my heart as I could only watch your agony,  
I have never felt so raw,  
Exposed,  
Alone and suffocating,  
Had never felt so defenceless,  
Whilst I could not protect you,  
No longer in eggs but we are still here,  
We suffered together,  
Out of our eggs, growing taller, stronger,  
I promise you will never suffer again.

## *Cannula*

You disappear on top of paper sheets,  
Sluggish blood has abandoned you,  
Drained from the heart gives a feeble beat,

Where white and powder blue meet,  
You are attacked with needles as I, too  
Am attacked with a sudden urge to retreat

Out of existence, not in this bed of sleet,  
Save for drips of red dew,  
You have disappeared amongst paper sheets,

Where white and grey needle meet,  
Sluggish blood has abandoned you,  
And I keep my fear discreet,

Not to fidget through a screaming heartbeat,  
Lest shredded veins let me spy you,  
Where red and deathly white meet,

Save for dried tears, I have kept my fear discrete,  
And you, not a whine, besides a bandage not a clue,  
Where grey and blue and white meet,  
You have disappeared amongst paper sheets.

## *Castle martyrs*

Legacy is more than crumbling castle walls  
Or the whispers of the trees' strangling ivy.  
Cold earth lines the tower with the hole in the stone.  
Languish here in the corpse-cold dirt, gaze upwards  
Up to the roof, where iron clouds smother the sky.  
Don't touch the walls, but crawl through, come and go,  
Go to the graveyard, lie on the tombs, trace the names,  
In the skeletal church, you are not a prisoner.  
Find comfort in the ice, wet kisses of green  
Old soul of a scarred land, silence in the arms of home  
The touch of the imperialistic ghost, the bloodied dogs.  
Green is the rainforest, but red is the stream,  
Wet fingers, pools and lakes, bleached bones of nations,  
Mix them into the pot, do not stew on the stew  
Or you might feel what you've done  
Don't forget your butcher's apron,  
Eat, but never admit, gold is a welcome distraction  
Silence is the key to hiding, and dead children cannot  
Seek revenge, tell the world where monsters lie  
Silence follows gunfire like you follow the innocent,  
Pull the roots, and crush the flowers between your fingers,  
Silence all tongues, except your own.  
Red is the land that is not your own.

Is the language of your fathers  
Truly something you can call your own,  
When it lies in pieces on your tongue?  
Buried in a box of dust in the cellar of your mind,  
The scorched edges  
Of the hole in your soul.  
Fear the permanence of unknown,  
The homeless child of two homes.

YASMIN KHAN

*Fairy-tale deception*

She went searching for her sight  
Despite the warnings she had left  
Her windows open and under  
The cover of night, in flew  
The witch's crows that  
Plucked out her eyeballs whole  
Stealing the windows to her soul

She heard the echoes of her feet  
The slap of frightened flesh on cold concrete  
In the darkness she wailed as something  
Fluttered by her cheek  
Ticklish wings of butterflies that came  
To dry tears that could not fall  
Then softness turned to slime  
Her eyes had found her  
But she batted them away  
Continuing on her search

## *Flames*

Tranquillity that the light forbids.

I am the light that shines too bright

The hypnotic yellow rays that turn the

Watching whites of eyes to burning red.

I am the red that runs through the pulsing veins,

That bleed through the pink bubbles of his skin

I am the one captured in the flames, the one

With the blazing heart that scorched yellow

Patterns with the white heat,

As he fades, blending with the warm colours

Blinking purple bubbles of pain away.

HANNAH LETCHFORD

*The sugar trail*

I know no more of daffodils  
Of dying suns and leaves.

Those crowns of roses  
Now crumpled lilies  
Thorns rested on your knees.

Only Francis walks on stars  
Patricia, she parts the sun,  
The flowers and the moons.

Those six palms  
I believe they reach  
Catch sugar cubes  
heaven between teeth.

Don't search in flowers  
Or between the A's  
The clouds always wash away.

All in yellows, whites and golds  
All in thriving suns and leaves,  
They only know of daffodils.



Even walls can't keep you from drifting  
Pulling green out from the dirt  
And yellow from the earth  
Even I can't stop the honey from dripping  
Mixing oats into bowls  
We float in emerald skies  
Even winds can't stop windows from closing  
Until blue birds' part the way  
Or jade beads appear on mornings  
Even he can't stop the sun from creeping  
Leaping onto Sunday's altar  
Pillows underneath your head  
Even robins can't keep winter from leaving  
The sleep caught in your eye  
The winter around the sheets  
Even night can't keep morning from coming  
But blinds can keep the sun from peeping  
And hands can keep eyes from waking.

## *Ghazal In paradise*

Are you happy, crying in paradise?

Birds have taken up home in paradise.

Is the sand not pink, lush in paradise?

Mermaid's hands will lead you in paradise.

Only aching hearts live in paradise.

Does money grow on trees in paradise?

My man is poisoned, dead in paradise.

His body rotting green in paradise.

Grass skirts whisper your name in paradise.

Daisy chains murdered you in paradise.

Burnt feet run, escape free in paradise.

Evelyn only looks for light in paradise.

## *Orchid palace*

I've left your roses crumpled in your cup  
I've rolled lavender into your coffee beans  
Stuffed myself into every corner of your room  
Flowers used to bloom under our feet  
To overthrow each cobbled street  
Arches of grass flourishing with us  
Carnations once landed in our open palms  
Orchid palace the place of light  
Where bells sung with every spin  
Fingers that curled through mine  
Halleluiah bluebells cried  
Smiles turned at the sun  
At kisses buried in the sand.

I've taken my stars and laid them bare  
I've stolen your eyes to hide them  
Throw them back into the crystal sea  
The moon has spun out from the clouds  
Whispering praise to me running free  
Bursting from the rose's thorns  
That stabbed back at the broken fields  
Fields where I once roamed  
Laid in honey suckle, shook peaches from the trees  
Maybe bleeding hearts will spring up again

Maybe I can climb back into your coffee cup

Maybe I should go free to orchid palace

And jump naked into the sea.

LYDIA MARSHALL

*Fons americanus*

Crowds pour in.

They stare in awe

at the grand fountain.

Security are on top form,

stopping a few people at the door.

In the bookshop we dive into books.

Families huddle together, lovers embrace

It's like a museum of history and love:

magnificent monuments to

inquisitive minds.

Silent footsteps. Loud footsteps.

Little children with headphones watch

educational videos. Disturbing paintings

depict violence and sorrow.

Colours bring light into the room.

'Babel', The Tower of radios,

arrests my eyes.

I gaze transfixed by its beauty.

every intricate detail is mesmerising

like heaven on earth.

The sweet-smelling aroma

hits the atmosphere

Noses flare

Exhilaration.

Food marinated and seasoned to perfection

Mind-blowing

Smooth butter chocolate dissolves in mouths

Strong anticipation.

The sweltering heat wrestles with the pelting rain

Rainbows smile lovingly at the

earth

Hearty laughter breaks momentary silence.

Golden sandcastles rise, gliding through fingertips,

Heart shatters like glass, heart mended with glue

Eyes widen with passion

Wild blooming like the Cherry blossom tree.

## *New day*

The sun awakens

Ferocious flames drill rhythmically into the village

What once was desolate blooms into busyness

The blazing sun defeats the wind,

Beating down on the world below

## Haikus

Heads bowed, fingers tap -

Devices get attention

Frozen like statues

Tall towers break necks

Reaching high, glimpsing heaven

The clouds are jealous

Bus Stop: a warzone

The bus cries out in –

Pain when each punch lands.

The wind fights my scarf

My feet squash the wet brown leaves –

Cold like an ice bath



## *Enamored*

Like the fly on the wall, I'm frozen in your presence

You melt this heart like the sun melts the ice

Falling. Deeper and deeper, closer and closer

Sweet melanated skin

Bright as crazy Christmas lights you shine

Embracing your beauty outside and within

Words flow so eloquently from your lips

You are a love poem

Your smile moves dark clouds

Your mind stimulates me

Your curls are as soft as wool

Your voice resonates, it touches my soul

Your passion cracks the sky

Hands interlock, moved by you.

I stretch them out, lines are clear  
Observing how they intertwine  
Older ones paved the way, nothing to fear.

Continuous spirals, unrestful mind  
Smooth as the skin of a new-born baby  
Similar to many, one of a kind.

Skilfully used by countless creators  
Cracks of hardship, layered like an onion  
Common theme amongst well known dictators

Suppressed emotions, pulverised soul  
Clenching drenched photographs  
Blurred mind, out of control

Memories of times past overflow  
The clock strikes again  
Overpowering rage, drunk in sorrow

Storm clouds devour the sky  
Stars lose their strength  
The world is still, years pass by  
A caterpillar becomes a butterfly.

DORATHEA GRACE MCKAY

*Virginia*

She's an intense goddess.

When she loves, it is with great, unmatched passion.

When she hates, it is with the fury of an indignant child.

Her emotions are a nuclear reactor –

unstable, all-consuming,

messy and temperamental.

You'll either bless her beauty

or curse her cruelty.

You'll either stay forever or never return.

Her fingertips brush the seas and the skies,

unwilling to decide between the lover that

caresses her shores with a sweet and gentle touch

or the one that wearily guards over her rolling hills,

protecting her loyally from whatever

threat may come knocking at her door.

She's a powerful goddess.

Weather obeys her every whim,

for better or for worse.

When she's cold,  
she's a frozen wasteland,  
a whirlwind of biting air and black ice.

When she's hot,  
it's a deep, humid heat filled with  
sweat rolling down temples, flushed cheeks, and clammy palms.

I would plead with her to find a middle ground, to have mercy,  
but who am I but a simple mortal  
to the unbending, almighty Virginia.

## *October Sunrises*

October sunrises paint the sky,  
alternating streaks of  
red,  
purple,  
pink.

A blend of colour  
from God's palette to  
the clouds before me.

The cul-de-sac a movie audience,  
its face reflecting the projected  
colours,  
captivated by the story of  
a silent beauty.

I, too, stare.

Attention captured by the rising sun,  
no thought of my billowing  
breath  
or of the air biting my hands.

God runs out of colours,  
blue overtaking everything

it touches.

And like a projector flickering off,

the magic ceases.

The day has brought

the end.

GRACE MCTERNAN

*Nothing, really*

The space

Between black ink on a white page

Plain flesh

Between eyes and nose and mouth

Open grass

Between oak and pine and rose

Blue sky

Between vague clouds and a harsh sun

Between atoms

Lie the fields of Asphodel

Nothing,

Really

Except everything else.

This time take your time  
Satisfy me from your soul,  
Through to mine

Don't just lick here or lick there.  
Focus boy. Pay attention  
To what could be yours if you tried

Look me in the eyes,  
Seduce me just fine.

May your fingers make me tingle,  
As you caress my cellulite thighs



First I spit the gum,  
Leaning my head into your  
Thick, muscular neck.

You taste like home, I can smell your clothes aren't fresh or new,  
But your skin tastes like soap and shampoo, and I want.

I wonder if after I will feel brand new,  
Just as the rest of them make me do.

As your hugeness encompasses my curviness,

Just as the sea cradles its fish

You smother my being,

In slow, electric responses of slippery wet tongue and touches.

Is this my validation to feel suppressed? Maybe.

Maybe I crave the utter essence of masculinity.

Of your 6ft entirety, of your dark hair,

With imperfections that make it all near and dear.

As your wide back moves into my breasts I can smell your weed breath.

Closer, closer you enter.

You slip into and nestle yourself within.

Every slight force and thrust I begin to feel new.

You edge further and deeper,  
My gasps for air suddenly became nowhere,  
As your hand thrashes at my throat,  
grabbing, strangling yet I am still moaning.

Bite your neck, scratch your back, you release,  
And I suck it all clean,  
Like it's the sweet, lush nectar that has been waiting for me.

JAMES TIMOTHY MULHOLLAND

*Black lilith*

*Inspired by Marlene Dumas's Evidence of Virtue*

As I lay swimming through perplexing dreams,  
varying from sweet to sour,  
I was awoken by a caress, in a room dark and dour,  
at three in the morning, the witching hour.

Before my eyes, across my bed, I saw a shadow  
that purred like a cat and felt as warm as dough.  
Slithering between her palms was a long yarn of silk,  
like a snake as white as milk.

When I saw the figure, my heart began to pound,  
my body hardened, frozen, unable to make a sound.  
The shadow before turned to face me, I felt certain I would die,  
but when I saw her face, her figure, I felt like a caged bird free to fly.

Her skin was like a starless sky at twilight, luminated by moonlight.  
She is a beauty, a vison, and a belle  
a paragon of perfection, right down to the cell.

She began to crawl towards me, my heart beating like a drummer in a hard rock band.  
I had never been so close to such a beautiful woman  
a rose of a creature, like black marble carved into angelic form

and given life by God's hand.

Her eyes, those large, lovely, yellow eyes, eyes like a queen cat  
she had crawled on top of me  
the area that housed my loins is where she sat.

Her silk leaped from her right arm and onto my chest.  
It began to slither across my body, binding me tightly, holding me ransom.  
I was immobile, paralysed, subject to her mercy,  
she had me like Delila had Samson.

She began to rock and throb upon me, she moaned, gasped, grinned and groaned  
I could feel my veins bubbling  
both of us in primal union, gave a satisfying moan.

My body trembled with ecstasy, rapture grew inside me  
growing large and strong  
like the roots of a tree

The hour waged on as the Succubus and I engaged in animalistic passion  
I was bound to her, she was bound to me  
but together, we engaged in an experience that was truly free.

## *Five fat bones*

Growing from the stems of my palm, Five Fat Bones, odd, but calm

Five Fat Bones, the two in the middle have beer bellies

Five Fat Bones, no doubt from watching telly

Five Fat Bones, the furthest from the others looks short, looks wrong

Five Fat Bones, the furthest looks fat, but strong

Five Fat Bones, the smallest wiggles and curls, Five Fat Bones, I think it's a girl

Five Fat Bones, the middle one, between the beer bellies and the strong

Five Fat Bones, it's not very interesting, not short, stout or long

Five Fat Bones, they are alien, peculiar, a puzzle and a mystery

Five Fat Bones, I wouldn't be without them, it's like they're a part of me

Spastic

A word that once labelled those like I

A word that labelled me Moron

A word that labelled me Freak

A word that calls me Animal

No, not even Animal

A Spastic is a Mistake and if one labels me as Spastic

Am I then a Mistake?

Spastic puts me in a cell

It straps me into a Straight Jacket

It marches me into a Lecture Room

Where Quacks and Shrinks pick me apart

Prodding Me, Poking Me, Shocking Me

They gawp and glare at me

Thankful they weren't born with a mind like I

Thankful they aren't the subject

Thankful they aren't Me

Spastic tells me I am not a Man

Spastic says that I am unworthy of being God's creature

And let me ask you a question

Who is and who isn't worthy of being God's creature?

I am not a spastic, I am Autistic

My mind is rare, my soul is a Wild Card

I may be alien in character, but my soul is Human

As human as any soul crafted by God

My existence is as genuine as the next man

I am not a spastic, I am Autistic

I Live, I Feel, I Dream

I am Human

HUMAIRA PANDOR

*To the lover i can never love*

*I Meet You at Night*

My dear friend the moon  
I will wait light years for you  
To reach down to me

*I Saw You in My Reflection*

I'll learn how to swim  
Breathe underwater I will  
Carve gills in my neck

*We Met long before 1967*

Take my hands in yours  
One day they will understand  
But for now we hide

*He Lived in The Westbank*

My sweet Israeli  
If I survive the airstrike  
I will climb the wall



*To be at one with words*

To be a writer  
is to look in the face of your mind  
and speak.

To create pictures of  
citrus colours and bright lights  
with dried out paints  
and twigs from last winter.

To be a writer is to give birth.

You are a maker  
fuelled by black coal.

The earth shakes  
at the sound of your words  
being read.

You are an old sponge.  
Formless.  
Filled with water  
and ready to burst.

EMILIJA PAULAUSKAITE

*Parisian landscapes*

So hypnotizing – Parisian nights  
Above the city spilt diamond ice.  
Romantic air around me twirls  
like a brush on landscape paintings.  
Empty Louvre wakes at this time  
while secrets fly through golden halls.  
So rich and heavy – a delight:  
the art of weeping birds.  
Expression only, gives hope so fair  
as ladies of perfected art watch  
and wait – hanging patiently  
on solid walls built from revolution.

Lingering of trumpets  
rushes through the air  
The sound of liquor bottles  
clashing in despair.  
Women dance and sparkle  
while men test poker cards  
The luck of newest money  
lies closely to their hearts.  
A ring of diamond value  
on dazzling lady's hand  
While others dream American  
as true American can.

Flossy clouds turn to pinks  
as freshest babe arrives today  
His rosy cheeks, yet not kissed lips:  
A mother's precious gift.  
Weeping sound so pure and soft  
A smile of gauze-like thoughts  
Innocence lay in its eyes  
Eyes so blue, as if the skies.  
Those eyes will look to her and him  
Those who must protect from sin  
Its heart will pound as fast as time  
I know that sound – my infant pounds  
on holy windows from the sky.

## *Reminder*

So long

dusty books give you a voice

To speak

To praise

Heroic acts of wars from which

only a few gained joys.

The noise

Once shuck iron hearts of

armed young men and boys

A reminder and a seed

planted in a town

now a grown city.

I walk

These paths before had drowned

In mud

In lies

Today replaced by concrete landscapes

Limited to blacks, greys, whites.

## *Redemption*

Calmness rushes through my skin

Skin so boiled

as if a sin

Cracked windows face a church

They are being judged

Praying for redemption

Demonic rains fall from the skies

Yet so pure they are

before our eyes

They say: God sees all in all

The subjects of life

Mortal liabilities

## *Moon glade*

He watched cobwebs grow  
where spiders hop like bunnies  
Slimy fur crawled past him  
on the surface of snow  
He watched air fly  
as roars of a cat lingered  
Grabbed his aging book  
It spoke to him  
He watched the final greens  
before a winter freeze  
Flowers hunted for sunlight  
but death of light crept near  
He watched snowflakes dance  
and swallow earth like food  
They attacked the river  
Turned into a slippery mirror  
Suddenly  
His thoughts shivered.

LAURA REHBEIN

*Changing seasons*

Yellow painted fields,  
Strawberry kiss at sunset,  
Blossoming feelings.

You scorch me, hot sand,  
Ice cream tears drip down my face,  
Why do I love you?

Colourful skies shine,  
Oh toffee apples, burnt wood,  
Fireworks in my heart.

Hair tangled in wind,  
Goosebumps rise, battling for warmth,  
Quick! Embrace me now!



RACHEL REINHARD

*Storm of the century*

There were clouds and dark skies where rain came down  
in a roar. Thunder crashed and lightning flashed which made mammals  
hide in their burrows. Humans rushed to seek shelter, the harsh wind  
stealing their umbrellas. No animals were in the air or land because  
flights were cancelled and planes were delayed; some got lost  
in the storm of the century. The rain turned to sleet, and the sleet  
turned to ice. Hail the size of golf balls boomed onto roofs and cars,  
but then it lightened as the wind slowed. The hail that had been sleet  
that had been rain was now flakes of snow, drifting down in a graceful way  
it was the most beautiful sight. And it wasn't long before  
everything was covered in white.

## *Silence*

at first there is nothing.

the silence is dark.

but then the heartbeat begins:

BA-DUM—

it's loud and deafening:

BA-DUM, BA-DUM.

but fades to white noises

which turns to voices

who talk and talk

none the same tongue,

then the heartbeat returns:

BA-DUM—

and it stops suddenly.

the silence is shattering,

making me wish i had

those voices in my head again.

HOLLY ROFF

*Secrets echo*

Gravity keeps me

Tethered to the Earth

Pulling like chains

Wrapped around mountains

And anchored to seas

The mountains themselves

Try to break free

From the seas hiding secrets

Which echo in air

Circling like gravity

I am pulled back down

When I climb for the stars

I am pulled back up

When I dive to the depths

Gravity keeps me

I long to learn secrets

Hiding in echoes

But the chains remain tethered

Wrapped around mountains

And anchored to seas

MARJANA SULTANA

*Memories of you*

Sincerity in treasured flowers wither  
Of those I had given you last spring.  
Pathetic, pastel hues once held our truth  
Now all petals collapse and fly around me  
They dance through our ghost house.  
Every filthy dust chases them down  
Like how your memories chase me around.  
I found our crumbling photographs  
Torn in two, with my wet tear marks.  
No celestial clock can rewind us back.  
To when your presence wasn't a phantom.  
I suffocate myself from the floral stench  
Of your ripped flannel, that I hold tight.  
The other thing you left behind.

## *Alluring lunar*

Panting under the blue moonlight.  
Dancing, amid the snivelling rain  
Weak drops lift the weights off me.  
Useless umbrellas flew everywhere  
There's nobody here to console me  
Eyes of the trampled puddles see more  
Did you miss my face?  
My bruised legs ran here yesterday;  
I couldn't breathe under the sunlight  
It's something you don't know.  
I will no longer reach out for your hand  
I'm here to console myself only.  
Panting under the blue moonlight  
See me dancing here every moon hour.

*Let me rise*

Suppressing sleeplessness

I built a sandcastle.

I'm surrounded by things that resemble

You...

I had lost myself

I wander in a path of precious stones.

The tides and undertows are guiding me

Knowing I had gained more in life through

Feigned sanguinity.

I dug the sand and

Filled a void in me.

I would give up and

Throw myself into the numbing sea

Lungs filled with buckets of water.

I couldn't show you

This perturbed part of me.

I would paint away

My canvas filled with recollections.

There are disfigured images of us:

Running under the iridescent sun.

In a meadow of languish larkspurs

I tripped over precious stones

I look up and you're gone;

An unfamiliar sound

I would hear my name through

A faint whisper...

I'm in tenebrous scenery

My uncertain eyes search

For nobody.

For you, I tried to rise.

*There goes summer*

Relics of bygone midsummer.

Prominent beams of sunlight and

Delicate snowdrops paint a scene.



## *Lost journeys*

Lost birds' nest on homely clouds.

Forgotten journey in burdening skies.

Sympathetic snowflakes lead the way.

## *August light*

August light recalled and overlooked.

Collapsing primrose petals trail a path.

Mellow leaf sounds descending.

## *Aurora*

Aurora lights hid the blue moon.  
We were fixated on the iridescent sky  
That brought pigments to the lake.

## *Withering flower*

Blue flower that resembles you.

Myriad petals plunge down.

The remaining ones will be gone.

REBECCA TWITCHEN

*Lana*

she rolls rose petals

and smokes them

like cigarettes

air turns to ash

in her mouth

mascara tears fall

from her face

into her coffee

she came under him

and cried over him

the sky split

and california drowned

you called  
my passing bluff  
i took refuge  
in the  
(between our bodies)  
contraction  
you  
misarranged  
me  
we rewinded  
and we were  
nuclear

## Membrane

my eyes were missing

he said

he put up posters

but i wouldn't know

of course

missing

pond green

unknown last sighting

please call

the telephone

never rang

i had no choice

but to hold his hand

PIPPA VECK

*My love*

My love is not irregular or strange,

nor is it unnatural or selfish.

So, when you ask me if I will change,

or when I am told I'm just rebellious

I will look you dead in the eye and say:

'Your hate will no longer pollute our lives.

You may have owned yesterday, and today,

but just wait until tomorrow arrives.'

No longer will we cower in shadows,

or hide our love stories behind stone walls;

we will blossom like a beautiful rose,

and proudly parade in front of town halls.

We are not here to spread an agenda,

just here to love, regardless of gender.



## *Her fire*

Her hair alight,  
rivers of gold,  
flowing through the space  
between us.

Sun soaked hair,  
sun stroked skin,  
ember roots to blinding ends;  
her hair ablaze.

The wind caressing her locks,  
like a marionette  
forced to bend to their wish,  
but elegant in its movement.

Most fear her flare,  
and shun her flame,  
left to burn alone;  
but I love her fire.

*To my bed*

My lifeboat in the unforgiving sea,  
holding me as the pain washes away;  
but left unnoticed, I crash on the bay,  
trapped in the brig, with you holding the key.

Comforted by your cushioned hold on me,  
haunting every waking hour I stay  
away from you, my heart in disarray;  
only stopped by your cotton pillow plea.

But deep down, I know your love will kill  
me, an addiction I will never kick.

My own personal paradise-filled pill,  
leaving a mess for my brain to unpick.  
You want to sail away, I know the drill,  
but I now board the boat as a sceptic

This town is built on its salt.

From the salt in the sea,  
rising and falling around the island's walls,  
like a circle of salt,  
protecting us against our demons,  
who take the shape of intruders.

Or the salt of its people,  
the salt of the Earth,  
reduced to tracksuits and teardrop tattoos.

Our past discarded,  
our future unclear,  
our present in disarray.

I love the small chance of you loving me,  
of you wanting us together for life,  
of you seeing the beauty I don't see,  
of you one day having me as your wife.

I love your protection when in danger,  
from spiders, killers or the deep darkness.  
When I'm tucked in your arms, I feel safer.  
But choosing to love me is not harmless.

I crave your attention, I won't deny;  
your soft petal pecks and soothing embrace  
I love more than stars in the night-time sky.  
But there is something we both need to face.

I have a big secret - maybe you knew,  
I love all of these; but I don't love you

## *After-party*

What a stupid game I played with myself,  
to think I am the focus of your love,  
To think you handpicked me off Life's cruel shelf;  
for I am the raven to her fine dove.  
My heart ran away with the thought of us,  
before my head could stop it from dreaming.  
Drunk on hopeless hope, too far to discuss;  
until sobriety leaves me screaming.

But maybe my delusions are the truth?  
Your eye's light reignites my heart's warm fire,  
and starts to run, hoping to find my youth.  
Until I see she is your true desire.  
I didn't love you, despite trying to,  
but karma caught up to me, this I knew.

## Enough

Stuck in my head,  
my very own personal hell,  
where logic is left at the door  
and the heart runs the show.

Or maybe the brain?

Or maybe

Her, the voice that echoes  
in a room full of people  
you're not pretty enough,  
you're not smart enough,  
you're not good enough,  
your friends have had enough  
of you not being enough  
for them.

Or maybe you're too much,  
maybe you've drained them  
with your paranoid worries,  
overactive depression  
and Monday moans  
that always last the week.

Their form of heaven?

Your closed mouth.

Breathe in,  
you're not enough.

Breathe out,  
you're too much.

Breathe in,  
they need more.

Breathe out,  
you give too much.

Why can't I breathe?!

Who is clutching at my throat?

Crushing my heart in their hand?

It's her.

Her rooftop palace has grown small

and she seeks greener pastures.

My organs? My skin? My body?

All hers now.

Loving me isn't a fetish  
to be idolised  
or villainised  
on the search results of night-time needs.

Loving me isn't an act of charity,  
or one of goodwill  
like a dutiful neighbour  
bringing a pie to the new resident.

Loving me isn't a back-up plan  
when the one you wanted  
left, escaped, fell  
through the cracks of your hands.

Loving me is normal,  
with full-faced kisses  
and teddy bear hugs.  
Loving me is loving me.



I see the way you look  
at her.

With craving blue eyes  
and secret stolen glances  
in between texts.

I see the way you laugh  
with her.

Heartily and unrefined,  
comfortable in her presence,  
comfortable in your voice.

I see the way you act  
with her.

Bold in your movements,  
confident in your words,  
happy in your life.

I see the way you want to be  
with her.

Content working together  
in synchronised harmony,  
destined soulmates.

I see the way you don't

see me.

Despite desperate pleas

of acknowledgment I'm

left on read.

HODAN YUSUF

*Marriage*

My husband lives inside my belly.

He cries all day, rearranges my furniture,

Causing me intense indigestion.

All for the purpose of remembering that he exists,

He before me.

He wanted to live inside a woman.

It doesn't matter which one.

Marriage was the drawbridge he

needed to get on my ship.

## *The sun*

I gave you the Sun on a golden platter.

I didn't understand at the time that

It wasn't for me to give you.

It was a gift to sustain myself

You got bored with my gift, left it to rot in a shed.

You never visited or even looked to see if it was still there.

Arrogantly, you believed it would always keep burning for you,

Eating itself in the process.

But the Sun cannot be ignored or hidden.

It will rise and demand to be seen,

Otherwise it will leave,

And you will notice its absence in the sky

## *Between us*

Between us lay rocks, pebbles, delayed road construction sites, building blocks that no one can afford to live in, a million people looking for work and a fast food restaurant at every corner.

Before we met, we had crossed the same road construction sites, passed the same building blocks on our way here.

We had stumbled and apologised to the million people we passed, who were impatient to get to the land of work.

We had smelled the same after work, lazy-excuse odour emitting from the bad-food restaurants.

On our way to each other, we kicked pebbles, avoided the rocks and ran to fill the space between us.

## *Neglect*

You didn't raise us up when we were babies.

You left us on the ground while you fought your perpetual war.

You had us too young,

So, you never figured out what you wanted.

Whilst you chased who you wanted to be,

you left us to rot.

When you did look down at your left overs,

your stomach churned.

You couldn't bear to see what we had turned into.

## *The west*

The painted West shrugs her shoulders at disillusioned visitors.

She reclines on a black leather sofa, missing the point.

They stared at the sun for so long,

They were blind to the specious landscape.

She plays a starring role in their folly.

They don't want to go home,

Looking dumbstruck,

So... they join in the game,

They praise her figure,

And sing melodies about her mystic beauty.

*Untitled poem*

They cut a part of you off

They say it's rotten

It will slow you down

It will only cost you more years of penance

Till you reach a place of ecstasy.

They convince you that you have a disease

Originating in your pelvic area

It is pervasive, contaminating your soul

Blinding you from seeing the right path

You will thank them, they tell you, for limiting the paths you can take.



## *Father figure*

I see these Letters posing in front of my mind

D – A – D

Three Letters that get more press than they deserve

I take a seat on the right angle of D

Taking a minute to consider why this is so important to me

I jump through the rope of A

Wondering why I want this so much

I walk through the gap in the Letter D

Seeing it for what it is

An empty concept without a person to fill it

### III. PROSE

GUZEL CELIK

*The last play*

Dark clouds covered the night sky. Raindrops began falling. The cold wind moved the trees' branches, making it seem like their shadows were dancing. Rushed footsteps neared the old corner shop. A girl kept glancing behind her. She put her hands on her knees and allowed herself to catch her breath. She tied her shoes, looked back again, and broke into a run. Soon after, a dark shadow crept after her.

After what seemed like a long time, the girl saw a small, old building appear, and she felt hope. The bricks were a faded grey colour and there were massive, wooden doors at the entrance, above which was the word 'Hospital' engraved in gold. She pushed open the door, this time without looking back.

A nurse rushed towards her, speaking quickly, 'Dear, are you alright? Seems like you've got a bad cut on your side.'

It was only then that the girl realized she was bleeding. Her vision suddenly got blurry as an invisible force pulled her into a subconscious state. The last thing she saw before she passed out was a familiar shadow.

*Cold, it was very cold.*

*She opened her eyes and saw white.*

*The ground was covered in snow and big snowflakes fell out of the sky. She heard a car engine in the distance. She glanced around and saw a stop sign with cars nearby, waiting to cross the intersection. The light turned green and cars quickly began moving, until a white truck hit a red car.*

*The red car flew into the air and crashed back down to the ground. Windows were broken and multiple metal sections of the car's body were crushed. The only sign of life seen from the red car was a hand trying to unlock the door from the outside. As weird as it seemed, the girl recognized the hand – it looked like her hand.*

*A mysterious shadow made its way towards the car.*

*The girl took a step back from where she stood, and the shadow stopped moving.*

*It was as if the shadow heard it. It was as if the shadow was looking at her.*

The vague sound of a beep woke her up. She was attached to a machine and medical tubes covered the floor. The nurse nearby noticed her waking up and hurried towards her side. She

began changing the tubes while checking something on paper. ‘How are you feeling today, Olivia?’ The nurse asked.

That name sounded unfamiliar. The girl tried speaking, but she couldn’t think of anything to say.

‘Olivia?’ The nurse looked worried. ‘Do you remember who you are?’

The girl, Oliva, tried digging into her memory, but everything went blank. ‘I don’t think so?’

The nurse nodded while writing a long sentence on paper. ‘I’ll be right back, okay?’ She filled the tube with purple liquid and left.

Olivia slowly stood up and walked towards the window. She pushed the curtains to the side and looked out. This didn’t look like the view from the hospital. It seemed as if she was at the corner shop. She could spot the old grey hospital building, but if that were the case, then she wasn’t at a hospital, and the woman wasn’t a nurse. This also meant that they probably weren’t *actually* helping her. She looked at the purple liquid and ripped the tubes out of her arms. Determined, and in shock, she locked the door and walked backwards slowly. She had thought she made it; she had thought she was safe.

A knock on the door scared her. ‘Olivia?’ There was a silent pause. ‘Why is the door locked?’

Olivia grabbed her bag and stuffed her clothes in it.

There was another knock. ‘Olivia?’

She tried to make something up: ‘I think I’m just going to change.’

The door handle twisted. ‘You need to lie down.’

She dashed toward the window but couldn’t open it, so she searched for something to break it. Gazing around, her eyes spotted a chair in the corner, and she smiled. Perfect. She moved towards it but stopped in her tracks when the door opened. The nurse looked confused and she looked at the curtains that were opened. That was probably a hint for her. She approached her with a needle. ‘No need to panic.’ Olivia didn’t waste a second anymore, she grabbed the chair and hurled it against the window. Glass shattered and she jumped out of the window.

Olivia had been on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor so the fall wasn’t bad, but something was stinging. She got up and heard a grunt behind her. The nurse had followed her out of the window, but her shoulder was positioned in a weird angle. ‘Don’t you dare walk away this time.’ She made a move toward her and Olivia ran for her life.

While she was running, she noticed that the ground was covered in snow. How long had Olivia been unconscious? She went by the real hospital and hid in a small alley, praying that the nurse would run the other way. Crouched, she saw the nurse pass and let out a breath of relief.

Seeing a movement out of the corner of her eye, she looked next to her and saw a black cat staring mysteriously at her with large, green eyes. It seemed like it was telling her to follow it. The cat walked away, and Olivia followed, not knowing what mess she was going to end up in next. She glanced back one last time at the hospital but didn't dare go in anymore, not if the same thing was about to happen... or something worse.

The cat walked through narrow alleys that Olivia had to squeeze through in order to keep following it. She didn't know why, but she had the feeling that the cat knew something that she didn't. Right when that thought passed, the cat stopped, and Olivia knew her gut feeling was right. They stopped in front of the red car she saw in her dreams. She glanced at the cat and back at the car, feeling the cold metal under her fingertips. She wiped snow from the glass and looked inside.

There was someone staring right at her.

*Tommy gun*

Tommy stood alone like he always had done. Head bent, feet apart, fists up. Never could stand still, always getting clipped round the back of the head for it. Except now he was the one doing all the hitting.

Overhead there was a moth gyrating against a bare bulb. There was the tap of its body hitting against the glass when there was no other sound. Tommy couldn't hear it over the punching bag and the rattling of the chain, then he'd pull away from it and he'd hear the tapping once more. His fists hit the bag and the moth hit the bulb.

'Hey, man. Calling it a night.'

The only other occupant of the gym waved. Tommy nodded, but nothing could pull him away from the bag. He moved around it, into it, away and collided like that damn moth.

The bare bulb managed to swing a bit when the door opened and the cold breeze swept through. It was windy in the winter. The nights got darker and loomed over them. When that wind hit the bulb swayed, casting a ring of light on him like a halo. He was no angel. He had no wings.

Fionn was in the office, the proud owner of the Giant Causeway Gym. He was a large Irish man with a mane of black locks even well into his late fifties. He paid no mind to Tommy, silhouetted by the shutters with the rhythmic shink of the bag's chain. Fionn was alright, had even offered him a job after the young offenders had turned him out for the third time and he'd had nothing else going for him. Said it was because his last name was Irish, and that was the only good his name had ever done him. They didn't talk much, but the wages were deposited into his account fortnightly and he'd been given free reign to train all he wanted when he wasn't manning the desk. It was those late nights where he got to take everything out with the bags that he lived for.

He moved his arm, furling his fist inside the enclosure of the glove. Sometimes it felt like his left arm was separated from the rest of him, like there were dotted lines where his arm was supposed to fit into the socket. He'd done himself injury plenty of times, but it was only recently that he felt that detachment of his limb creep up on him. The not-so-distant sound of police sirens sounded in his mind, Dad's face – his *voice*. His Dad had dislocated Tommy's shoulder long before Tommy had ever stepped foot in the boxing ring.

'Tommy.'

He struck the bag. Swung himself forward, moving off the balls of his feet, turned in again and hit. Always keeping the ball rolling. Willing the voice to go away.

‘Tommy, you got a call,’ Fionn said. He was stood in the doorway of the cramped office, phone in hand, a look passing his face that said he was repeating himself.

‘Take down a message.’

‘I ain’t your damn secretary, Sheehan.’

Tommy heard him retreat back inside. He’d take the message anyway.

A shuddering breath racked at his chest. Dad was gone; the siren’s were far away again. The memory of Jameson’s whiskey and smoke was choking him. He took ahold of the bag, stilling it mid-sway, and leaned his head forward and into the vinyl.

Fionn came to the door again. ‘Guy says he’s your brother. Says it’s important.’

Tommy blinked. He’d written to Malachy a few times. Sure he had. But a lot of things had been left unsaid, a silence rising between the two of them. It was hard to know what to say when so much time had passed. Like their home movies had reeled and the middle parts had skipped over, the tape flickering out before the screen cut in again out of nowhere.

‘Well?’

‘Yeah... Yeah, I’ll take it.’

He ripped the velcro cuffs open with his teeth. The right hand first, then the left. Once upon a time his brother would have been right there with him, ready to take on the ring.

Fionn stood immobile, impatient. He had an expectant look on his face, a fond exasperation as the clock ticked on by, one eyebrow raised and the beginnings of an amused smile touched his lips. Watching Tommy try to hold a conversation was a source of amusement for him. Watching him struggle to speak on the phone was as good as watching him fight.

Tommy took the phone, nodding towards his boss.

‘Malachy?’

‘Tommy Gun— Tommy, hey.’ The electrical buzz strained over his voice, but it was Malachy. Quiet and impersonal, tinged with a distance that hung over the both of them.

That nickname threw him off. He figured it must have been three years now. Yeah, that sounded about right to him. Three years alone. Three years since he had seen his brother getting hauled off by the police, since he’d been called Tommy Gun at all.

‘Listen, I heard...’ There was some shuffling, a muffled voice of a man. ‘Not now, asshole. Can’t you see I’m on the phone? I’ll—’ The sound was muffled, vague threats conveyed between inmates coarse over the phone line. Then, Malachy said, ‘Tommy, you still there?’

‘Yeah,’ Tommy said. ‘I’m still here.’

He felt nineteen again, fresh out of a young offenders institute and unable to so much as take a piss without asking. Malachy hadn't been there at that time. He was two years deep in his own sentence. Nobody had been waiting for him when he got out. He'd see Dad's face in his dreams, hadn't seen him in person since before he'd been hauled in. All he had left of his family now was the cigarette burns and belt marks and everything left in between.

'I heard about Dad,' Malachy said. It sounded so simple when he put it like that. 'Good riddance to him.'

'It wasn't the alcohol that killed him.' Tommy cringed at how abrupt it all sounded. Hell, Malachy hadn't so much as uttered the word and here he was spilling all the gory details. 'It was the cancer that got him in the end. Stomach and lung. Not even the liver.'

The line was silent, he heard a static ridden shuffle and that was the only sign his brother was still there. He went on to say more, to tell him the funeral was a few days ago, but he couldn't get the words out.

'Listen, Tommy,' Malachy said, 'I've gotta go.'

He nodded, then realised his brother couldn't see him at all. 'Yeah, okay.'

The line disconnected. Malachy was good at not saying goodbye.

'Chelmsford prison, huh?' Fionn called from the office. 'Had to accept the call from an inmate with the operator.'

Tommy nodded. He'd wrote down the office number in the last letter he'd sent, well over a year ago. His new address, too, but he'd never gotten a letter back.

'How long for?'

'Nine years for armed robbery. He's served three.'

Fionn whistled low. He took the phone from Tommy's limp hand, considering him with a wary, almost concerned look. 'You go on home now, it's getting late. I can handle lock up on my own tonight, son.'

Tommy was no son. His Dad was dead and he had never known how to be a son in the first place. Now it was like he didn't know how to be a brother, either. Not when Malachy had called only once in the last three years, with not so much as a 'How are you?' before the line died too.

He watched Fionn retreat back to the office, and he didn't realise he was doing as he was told until he was at the door. Somehow he'd managed to change out of his gym clothes, and if he hadn't checked he would have thought he was wearing his old uniform. He hadn't been locked up for a good year now, but sometimes he found himself stuck back in the institution. It was all because of Dad and Malachy, they'd sent him through a loop hadn't they? Dad up and dying without a care in the world and Malachy calling him out of nowhere. No word for three years,



and suddenly he's got a funeral invitation and a phone call all at once. Sheehan men were a selfish lot alright.

He stepped out of the gym and into the open air. Stupidly, he tried to muster his brother's face in his mind but drew nothing but blanks. He'd always had a terrible memory for faces. He hadn't remembered what his Dad had looked like until he'd seen the memorial card with his picture. He could remember what he smelled like though, his favourite brand of whiskey and the putrid stench of alcoholic bile that stained his undershirt. Malachy had always smelled of soap and cigarette smoke, and Tommy wondered if that had changed at all.

Walking alongside the cracked pavement he made up his mind then and there. He wouldn't be going back to an empty flat with his sparse belongings dotted across it. If he was going to be flung into the past all over again there was only one thing for it; the pub.

The Hole in the Wall was two streets over from the Giant Causeway Gym. As far as bars went, it was the standard. The wooden panels of the booths were chipped, the engraved pattern across them worn and unevenly levelled over the years of patrons parking their backsides against them. At the bar the drinks slopped over the rim of the glasses, soaking beer mats adorned with brand logos, parked beneath the wooden top were faux leather stools spewing stuffing from the gaping mouth of opened thread. It wasn't so busy; it was a work night after all, but that had never stopped his Dad, so why should it stop Tommy?

He ordered a pint of some house special IPA sold cheap. A man beside him started on the history behind it, something about India and British Soldiers with their love of drink. He stopped talking when Tommy looked at him.

Behind the barman was a barrage of signs and slogans such as 'BEER: HELPING UGLY PEOPLE HAVE SEX SINCE 1962'. A part of him was tempted to ask for Jameson, but he didn't. He might have been going back but he was no masochist.

Seated at the bar, he looked out the window warped by patterns of bent out of shape diamonds, the glass stained bottle green and wine red. It was funny how bars and churches had their stained-glass windows, the houses of worship that they were. Men who worship God only do so once a week, a drunk worshiped the drink everyday.

All of a sudden a girl from a table came up and joined him. She had dark hair that reached the small of her back and a pretty white blouse that dipped at her cleavage when she turned towards him. Her friends all laughed from their table, shooting the pair of them looks and whispering amongst themselves like kids. She didn't look so old, face free of makeup and the remnants of roundness at her cheeks. His own age, maybe, and he forgot he wasn't that old in the first place.

'My name's Grace,' she said.

Tommy looked at her and watched her face go red all of a sudden. He'd always been told that meeting his eyes was like looking down the barrel of a gun, it wasn't something he could help any. That flush went all the way down to her chest. He couldn't help but grin.

'Tommy.'

'Well, Tommy.' She shot him a smile that made him feel like he'd won the lottery. 'Are you going to buy a girl a drink?'

He smiled back at her, all thoughts of the past gone.

After a few rounds she had led him to a barren corner, away from prying eyes. Their hands roamed over one another, underneath their clothes and grasping desperately for something with a newfound urgency. He felt like a little kid again, necking in the dark as if he were at some school dance. This close up he could tell her nose had been broken once upon a time, and she looked up at him with hooded brown eyes and lashes so long they brushed her cheeks.

Grace eventually pulled herself away to go back to her friends, her voice hoarse and her cheeks pink. She had written her number on a receipt with a pen she'd borrowed from the bar; she signed it with a love heart at the bottom and a single letter G. He promised he'd call. And maybe he would.

He felt fuzzy. A lazy kind of high had taken him by the hand as he watched her walk away, back to her giggling friends. He stopped by a man at the bar and asked for a cigarette, it didn't occur to him that he hadn't had a smoke since he'd taken up training again. The man gave him one and the borrow of a light, grumbling under his breath about goddamn social smokers.

When he went outside he noticed two men at the gate but paid them no mind. Tommy was a man well spent, unable to keep the grin from his face as he lit up his cigarette. All in all, the night hadn't gone so bad.

He'd spent his whole life thinking one mean drunk was gonna kill him. What he'd done so far with his twenty years couldn't even be considered living. It was something akin to waiting: waiting for Dad to kill him, waiting for him to pick up the bottle once more. Once a drunk always a drunk. Except his Dad had died, and suddenly there was no more waiting. Just indecision.

Tonight was the end of all that, though. Tommy decided that he was going to live, that he'd start then and there.

Two figures stood shoddily erect at the beer garden gate, neither of them looked able to stand straight worth shit, flags blowing in the wind. Tommy knew they were drunk, knew it as well as his abc's. They were looking for a fight, and they'd found each other.

He should leave; the station was only round the corner from here, his flat only a stop away. There was a pretty girl indoors waiting for him with the promise of maybe something more. He shouldn't be outside in the first place. There was nothing to it really, he didn't know either of them from Sam and he didn't owe them anything. But he'd spent his whole life getting knocked around by a drunk, and maybe just once he wanted to see if there was something other than violence at the bottom of a bottle.

The taller guy got one hit in before Tommy made his choice.

'Hey!' He called out, jogging lightly towards them. 'What's the problem here?'

The guy at the gate didn't say anything. At first Tommy had thought the two were drunk out of their minds, but the guy looked straight enough.

The smaller one, leant up against the wall so as to prop himself up, flung an arm over his sweaty forehead. A mop of auburn hair was all about his face and in his eyes. 'Who the fuck are you?'

Tommy looked at his beady red eyes buried beneath all that hair. He wasn't scared of drunks anymore. Especially not of little red-haired ones that could hardly stand.

'No one,' he said. 'Just break it up, alright? I ain't looking for trouble or nothing.'

The guy swore, grasping at the windowsill to pull himself up properly. 'What the hell do you know, anyway? Mind your own business, boyo.'

All at once the guy had lurched forward. Maybe he meant to push Tommy or else had lost all sense of what was up and what was down. The movement was so sudden that Tommy caught the guy before he fell without thinking. He realised he had made a mistake when he ignored the guy at the door.

It's the silent ones you gotta look out for, Tommy Gun. That's what Malachy would always tell him.

So he caught the red-haired fella, but the guy at the door had caught him with a blade. Tommy hadn't even seen the fucker carrying it, didn't know he was stabbed at all until he looked down and saw the denim of his jeans go red.

It had never been half as bad when his Dad was feeling talkative; he'd spew all kinds of shit and get a little handsy is all. But when he went silent that's when the worst had come, hadn't it? That was when belts and boots and bottles had come into the equation, cigarettes put out on his skin and his first broken bone.

He heard them run, wasn't holding on to that other guy at all now, never once looking up from the blossoming of his trouser leg.

He realised he was still holding the cigarette, he'd dropped the lighter though. He got on his knees to pick it up, realising it had blood all over it, that he had blood on his hands. It wasn't

his lighter; he had to give it back to the man at the bar. He wondered what that other bloke had been saying, about that IPA.

There was no pain. A part of him knew it was his body going into shock, but the fact that he'd been stabbed at all wasn't a coherent thought. Instead, his head kind of swirled, tipping forward as if he was nodding off. He didn't think he could get up, even if his leg hadn't been bleeding – and, oh, there was so much blood – even if he hadn't been knocking back the drinks. He wondered how his old man did it, because he sure as hell made it look easy.

He didn't know how much time had passed. God, was he cold, not wearing so much as a jacket. Things just seemed to pass him by.

Someone opened the door. The light flooded over him suddenly and the red was that much brighter than before. A girl let out a scream. Then he heard nothing at all.

He could still see, but just barely.

Someone was hovering over him, saying something.

'What?' Tommy said, his own voice reverberating through his ears.

'I'm calling you an ambulance, son, just hold on,' they repeated.

He wanted to ask why they were whispering. Why he needed an ambulance at all. He could barely lift his head and it was so damn cold. What was he supposed to hold onto?

'He's bleeding from the leg,' the voice, ever so distant, persisted. There was a low, buzzing quality to it. Like he was hearing a programme from some beat up TV set one room over, the characters voices cracking and bleeding altogether in the background.

'I- I think the knife hit an artery or something. Does anyone know how long he's been out here?'

Then, as if someone had switched the TV off altogether, there was nothing. Not even white noise. He couldn't feel a thing, not even the cold.

Tommy felt he was the bare bulb in the gym, flickering, in and out. Bulbs could only last so long, though, before they gave out altogether. He thought he saw a moth, except he realised belatedly that his eyes were closed in the first place. It pushed against him only to be pushed back, then it came in again before disappearing all at once.

You spend your whole life thinking one mean drunk's gonna kill you, only for another mean drunk to get you in the end.

*Thomas Sheehan, aged twenty, pronounced dead at eight past one in the morning. Cause of death: blood loss resulting from a stab wound to the leg.*

Tommy Gun had really hated mean drunks.

ROBYN DEVON

*Goodbye girl*

Awake, but not yet lucid. George decided not to move, feeling like he'd drunk 8 litres of vodka and been hit by a freight train. He was in no hurry to be upright, or to answer the disembodied voice calling him.

'Hello? Hey. Wake up. Wake up!'

He prised open an eye, and the voice gained ferocity.

'Wake up!'

'I'm up.' He sat up to greet a face-full of Francis Rossi. Not the real Francis Rossi, but a photo of him on the t-shirt the person rousing him was wearing. *STATUS QUO READING FESTIVAL 1978*, it read proudly.

'Thank God.'

The disembodied voice turned out to be the 20-something owner of the Quo t-shirt, her tone mollifying.

Now alert, he felt grass and daisies brush his arms and a slight pain in his knees surfaced as he pressed up into a kneeling position. Flashes of *The Jam's* disappointing set came to mind, as did falling into a tent in the dark – hence the bruised knees – but no memories of a woman. Scanning the ground and finding crumpled cans and beer bottles, he realised something.

'Where is everyone?'

'Gone home. It's Sunday. Festival's over. Why are you still here? I thought you were dead.'

George didn't get the impression she was first aid trained, and her stab at life support might've been an investigative poke with her shoe.

'So you don't know who I am?'

'Should I?'

She didn't know who he was either. A great start.

'I lost my friends,' she continued. 'They've got my ticket home. Any chance you've got a train fare to Guildford?'

'No.'

'Right.' She turned on her heel, having failed to get what she wanted.

'Wait, hold on.' He got to his feet, stumbling as his legs filled with pins, 'I'm from Guildford. I have a car.'

She turned back.

'You're saying you're... cool to...?' She rolled her hand to fill in the gaps.

'Yeah. Time is short, and life is cruel, but it's up to us to change in a town called Guildford.'

She shook her head and looked vaguely disgusted by his singing. Or maybe his breath, he couldn't tell.

'What's your name?' She asked, rummaging through her glorious mass of hair to magic up a pair of sunglasses.

'George,' said George.

'Harper,' replied Harper. 'So Georgie boy, what was your favourite set?'

'Hmm.' He acted as though he was pondering this and not fighting the urge to heave last night's Heineken all over her olive platforms. He went with the safe option.

'Status Quo?'

'Hesitation. I like it.'

Harper seemed to enjoy watching George. Even his car seemed to be a mystery to him, as he took his time mulling over the key in his hand and the door of an Austin Mini. He plunged the key in and indicated her chariot awaited. George began navigating his way out of the festival grounds, tossing an A-Z into Harper's lap.

'Do you like shortcuts?'

'About as much as I liked Hyde Park in '76.' Harper hoped he knew what she was talking about. As George rolled down the convertible and accelerated, Harper's hair whooshed upwards like a hungry flame. She chucked the A-Z in her foot well as they left the festival behind.

\*

Rolling hillsides slowly tapered into modern cityscapes: kids running down paths hitting each other with sticks interspersed with petrol stations and gossiping teenagers sitting on walls.

A particular building caught George's eye, and soon they were stopping.

Harper stirred from her daydreaming.

'Ice cream?'

'The best ice cream.' George beckoned her towards the ice cream parlour, Harper gingerly complying. For under 20p the pair had a scoop of homemade vanilla ice cream and a caffeinated pick-me-up for George, who tore open two sugar packets with his teeth before balancing the cones and cup to lower himself into the driving seat.

On the road, Harper's hair whipped around so much that the ice cream was sticking to it. She laughed as she tried to suck it from every strand and lick where it had dribbled down her arm.

She held George's cone as he drove, so he, too, got the odd surprise hair with his treat. On that drive, despite the fact she was a stranger, the situation felt intimate. They spoke about the festival and compared notes on life in Guildford, and in no time, they were being welcomed to 'Historic Guildford' by a metal sign.

At Harper's request, he dropped her at the Little White Lion.

'Well,' Harper handed George the morsel of cone she'd been holding onto. 'Thank you. It's been cool.'

'Likewise.'

Harper took a lipstick from her pocket and scribbled on the back of her Reading ticket stump. 'My house phone.' She said, before she winked and popped it into the cone.

'See you around, Harper.' He smiled brightly as she slammed the door, her smile not wilting as she faded off down the street.

Thanks to the killer hangover, it took far longer than usual to navigate his way home, but eventually he found his father's Cortina parked on the driveway. By the time he'd parked his car over on the next street and found his front door keys, he wanted to crawl rather than walk, but when his feet hit the carpet things seemed to feel a little better.

His mum was cooking sausages for tea and the delectable smell filled the air, yet he went straight to the rotary phone in the living room. He snatched it and dialled the number on the ticket.

It was engaged.

After dinner, George went straight to the phone.

Engaged, again. He double-checked the number. Maybe it was wrong?

Dejected, he plonked the phone down.

*Batman* was coming on in five minutes; that always cheered him up. Besides, she lived in Guildford. It wouldn't be too long until he saw her again.

\*

Two months later, George was filling a bag of Pic 'n' Mix at Woolworths to take to the pictures. At the other end of the selection, teasing out the biggest gummy worm she could find, was a familiar cloak of blonde hair.

'Hey,' George almost ran at her and Harper dropped the gummy worm in surprise.

'Oh. Hi?' Harper, confused, turned away and grabbed another worm.

'You remember me? George? Ice cream in the convertible?'

'Yep,' Harper replied sharply. 'Thought you wasn't interested.'

'Why'd you think that?'

'You never called.'

'I did, every day for a week. Always engaged.'

As Harper moved over to the midget gems, he took out the ticket. She grabbed it to look at what she'd written.

'The number's right.'

'Are you sure?' he pressed.

She took the paper from him and scrutinised it.

'Oh,' she retrieved a biro from her denim jacket and looped the '8' at the end properly so that it looked less like a '0'. 'Oops.'

'If you would like to accompany me to see *Halloween*, I will buy all the sweets you can fit in that bag,' George offered.

'Then you'll stick me paying for the tickets.'

'I'll get the tickets too.'

Harper mulled this over for a moment, before shovelling almost a pound of American hard gums into her bag.

The walk to Epsom Road for the Odeon revealed Harper was a typist working part-time at Guildford Crown Court, spending the rest of her time creating mixtapes on her music centre or sleeping. George's life looked a lot plainer in comparison.

'So what do you do?' Harper asked.

'I watch telly.'

'Fair enough. Ours is still black and white.'

'Oof, a curtain burner?'

'Just a bit.'

'That's kind of my thing, I fix them.'

'It's good to have you around then.'



George didn't focus much on the film. He was more engaged with watching Harper concentrate while shovelling fizzy dummies into her mouth. When she didn't understand what was going on, a single wrinkle appeared on her head, and her next sweet would hover in her hand until she decoded what was on screen. He smiled and pretended to watch the film awhile.

\*

Once the film was over, he offered to walk her home, which she declined. He offered her his jacket, which she stared at pensively as the night air bit her knees. Before she caught her breath to answer, his woollen coat was over her shoulders, and she had melted into a comfortable smile.

They had their first kiss on that corner, cold mouth on cold mouth, confusion on their faces that quickly rolled over to relief. Their second kiss was at Derek's record shop on the high street, thumbing through the jagged plastic edges in hopes of finding something that wasn't from *Grease*. Their third kiss was in her bed – beneath posters Harper had ripped from Rolling Stone magazine, and framed pressed flowers from outings as a child.

Before either of them knew it, another month had gone by, and it was almost December. Harper's mum was always calm around him and her dad welcomed him too, making him breakfast the following morning as Harper readied herself for work. He scooped her up from behind and she smiled weakly.

'I'll see you tonight then?' he whispered as he pecked her on the cheek.

'Yeah. Will do.' She chucked her new typewriter ribbon into her bag as she went out the door, George lingering to wave her off.

George was called out only twice that day, and by the same woman whose TV he'd fixed last week. People were buying reliable Japanese TVs, and he knew he didn't have much longer in the business.

He went home and waited by the phone for Harper's call at 7 o'clock, which didn't happen. He waited another hour, his heart soaring when it rang, but sinking straight back down again when it was his grandmother. When he finally got off the phone, it was 9 o'clock. He called again. Still nothing.

He walked over to Harper's house; all the lights were off. He knocked anyway and got no reply. He didn't want to take it a step further and go to her work – that would have been stalkery – so he returned home to his single mattress.

The following morning, he got up early and rang the bell outside Harper's house again. Nothing. He went to Guildford Crown Court and asked the other girls if they'd seen Harper, who simply looked bemusedly to one another and shrugged.

'Maybe she's at her new boyfriend's place?' offered one girl.

'I *am* her new boyfriend. I'm getting a bit worried.' He had serial killer headlines blasting through his brain, imagining her limp body being thrown into the River Wey, but all the girls offered was wide eyes and silence. Was she losing interest? Had he scared her off? It wasn't the first time this had happened. It crippled him, stunted him, he just needed an answer to his calls.

He was called out to work but made excuses to stay home. He called her two times, three times, five, seven... He lost count once it had been two days. A week went by and he had to do something, instead of spending his time drowning his sorrows with whiskey from his dad's liquor cabinet. At Harper's, the lights were still off, no answers to knocks or phone calls, and no sight of the girl who had drove him crazy with love, now driving him crazy with absence.

He slipped in with the back-door key beneath the doormat. It felt invasive, but this was an emergency; he hadn't seen a trace of her in over a week.

The house was still apart from the drippy kitchen tap, the same mound of breakfast washing up there to welcome him, Harper's cereal bowl still on the kitchen table. He took the spoon from the bowl, giving him something to hold that was tangible and not going anywhere.

He walked into the living room, a bit dazed from the whiskey, and something felt majorly off. The whiskey must have been stronger than the bottle told, as he couldn't see Harper in any family photo. Only Harper's mum and dad.

'The fuck?'

He walked out backwards and scampered upstairs, throwing Harper's bedroom door open. A dusty cross-trainer and rowing machine stood in a bare room, no posters, no pressed flowers on the walls, no perfume in the air.

'Harper?' He called, searching the airing cupboard and shelves and finding only knick-knacks and towels. Her presence had been effaced from the universe. George allowed himself to cry upon seeing Harper's parent's empty bedroom, lost and befuddled.

He found himself being drawn to the bathroom medicine cabinet, finding stacks of Quaaludes in blister packs, unguarded, inviting. The prescription sticker read ANALINE SANFORD, Harper's mum. He took one. Then another, then three, then four, and soon the whole pack was gone. They worked fast, the bathroom spinning like a pinwheel. He lumbered

over to Harper's bedroom, just having enough dexterity left to put the needle to her last played record, fittingly titled *Goodbye Girl*.

He threw himself at her bed, melting into the buttercream mattress. Within a femtosecond, he was asleep. Then, George's head exploded. For real, bits of brain up the wall, dust flying out of his head like banging a seat cushion on a train.

\*

He sucked in air sharply and was awake, head intact. He was stood upright in a padded human microwave, steam and himself rushing out of the open door, his body flopping into two sets of arms.

'Why does he always kill himself?' one disembodied pair of arms muttered.

'What the fuck? Where's my spoon?' were the first words George graced the world with.

'Okay, he's lucid,' said that voice again. 'Welcome home, mate. Happy 2030.'

The steam dissipated and two guys in white overalls were revealed. Just how many ludes had he taken? People don't get thrust 60 years into the future like a bag of steamed peas.

'Where's Harper?' George croaked, nauseated. It was like being plunged back into the last day of Reading all over again.

'Don't worry, we'll get someone to walk you through everything once you're out of your pyjamas.'

It all felt clinical, the air permeated with disinfectant and undertones of urine. Maybe there had been an accident?

'What happened? Is Harper okay?'

'We're walking you to your locker now,' was the man's friendly but cagey response.

George was brought to a white door and one of the men let him go, the other pushing the door open. He was firmly pushed inside, and the door slammed behind him, leaving him alone in a dingy changing room, different names in pen on laminated signs on lockers. His vision was still wavy, but he managed to pick out his surname, MOODLEY, engraved on the one at the very end.

He opened the locker, and a musty coat and a leaflet greeted him, shouting 'WELCOME BACK!' in yellow squiggly letters.

*Dear customer,*

*Welcome back to the 21st century! We hope you have enjoyed your Retro Dating experience as much as we have enjoyed serving you. Please take a few minutes to acclimatise, and do not hesitate to contact an assistant if you have any questions.*

*Thank you for using ReDa, the UK's number one virtual dating service. Want to win £35,000? Simply fill out the survey on the reverse and hand it in at reception.*

George flipped the leaflet over to see the questionnaire on the reverse, flipping it again in disbelief.

‘Hey! Hey, you two! What the fuck is this?’ George bashed on the door with his fist, crumpling the leaflet of lies.

‘Where’s Harper? What have you done with her?’ He gave the door a few more cracks but the men did not return, he began to pace and mutter. ‘Ok, we’re just tripping balls, we’ve done it before, it’s fine.’

Jolting him out of his panic, the door opened onto a suited gentleman standing before him.

‘George Moodley? My name is Tyrece Lewis. Please, remain calm; we’ll decamp in my office. Would you like to follow me?’

There was something in the man’s tone that suggested he had said those words before, and George stole a glimpse of one of the men, a needle discreetly readied.

Taken aback, he nodded and followed Tyrece out of the changing room. The shoebox office had posters depicting smiling, or kissing, cartoon couples in clothing of a variety of different eras.

‘Would you like some tea? Coffee? Squash?’

‘Are you seriously trying to make this mundane? I’ve just been zapped into the future and you think my biggest concern is thirst?’

‘Coffee. I know you like coffee, black, but two sugars, right?’

George gaped at Tyrece, feeling cold and faint.

‘Let me explain what’s going on,’ Tyrece continued, ‘you signed up for our Retro Dating plan, and we paired you up with a partner, sharing similar interests and traits. If one or both chooses after a selected amount of time, prospective partners can decide if they want to remain in the programme and spend more time together, be re-partnered, or come out of the programme to meet in real-time.’

‘What? What programme?’

‘As I said,’ Tyrece took a steadying breath, ‘the Retro Dating programme. ReDa for short, like virtual reality, but spicier. It appeals, as you can spend quality time with a person without the

distractions of modern technology. You signed an agreement with us to enter our programme to find love.'

'I did find love! Where is she? Where's Harper?'

'She's not interested in spending more time with you. Might I suggest we go over the onboarding package for the 1980s? Maybe Manchester, starting in the Ritz nightclub?'

'What? Come on, this is a joke. It's 1978, I am *very* high, possibly in an ambulance, and-'

'No,' Tyrece responded curtly, pinching the bridge of his nose,

'It's the 4th of January 2030. Your name is George Moodley, you were born on the 19th July 2000. You have never, nor will ever, be in 1978. It's a simulation. It's not real.'

George shrunk in his seat, silenced. He jammed a thumb in his mouth and bit on it hard, feeling the pinch, and the slight crunch of his teeth, yanking it back out and flapping the pain out of his hand.

'Shit,' fell out of George's mouth, plaintive and small. 'Can I see her?'

\*

It had taken two days to break the stubborn staff into letting him see Harper. They kept citing data protection, and George kept citing he didn't know what that meant.

Her name wasn't Harper. Her name was Jill. Ms Jillian Alligood. His heart beat as if it pumped liquid cocaine as he waited outside the door, trying to glimpse her through the viewing window. Nervously, he entered the meeting room.

A pale woman looked up, eyes drowning in lilac eye bags. Perhaps in her mid-thirties, she had faint brackets either side of her lips and gold highlights that were sloping far down her hair after months of neglect. She was a little plumper than Harper, slightly shorter too.

'You don't look too great yourself y'know.' Her introduction was sharp. He couldn't envision that voice screaming along to the radio in a heatwave as he could so clearly recall Harper doing. Were they sure this was Harper?

'Yes, it really is me.' She could read every question he had from his expression. Asking would only waste time she had paid to be in another simulation.

George still looked totally bamboozled, so she dug into her handbag. She slid a photo across the table. It showed a woman who was the spitting image of Harper, a daisy chain crown around her head.

'That was my grandmother. She is the image I adopt when I enter the sim. You really didn't know it was a simulation?'

'What happened?'

‘Please don’t make me do this.’ Jill eased herself out of her seat and George reached over to touch her fingers.

‘Just tell me. I have to know.’

‘I don’t know where to start.’ Jill slinked back into the chair and puffed out her cheeks.

‘You’re crap in bed, you’re clingy, and know nothing about the 1970’s. Really? The Town Called Malice reference? That was 1982. Something felt missing, lacking about you. I felt like I didn’t know you.’

‘I don’t know me, not at all. Wanna know who I do know? You.’ His eyes watered a little under the florescent lighting. ‘I know you, I don’t care whether we’re in 1978 or 2030, I want to give it a try. Do you?’

Jill thought back to the day she met George, the dashing stranger who’d bought her ice cream, yet who she’d shrugged off by vanishing. Endearingly persistent, who only did his best to make her smile.

‘Alright. Drinks, at the spoons around the corner. Nine tonight?’

‘What’s spoons? And where are we, exactly?’

‘It’s a pub. And we’re in East London.’

\*

Tyrece desperately tried to talk George into another dating package after George had drinks with Jill, but he wasn’t having any of it. Tyrece handed him a business card with a map on the back in case he needed to contact ReDa again, but he did so uneasily.

It hadn’t been easy making conversation with Jill, as his memory of 2030 was very patchy. He didn’t understand how to use the phone ReDa had provided him with, made of glass and without a rotary dial. It was like alien technology. He learned more about ‘new’ Harper, Jill, a divorcee, who had taken two months unpaid leave at her grocery delivery job to alleviate a bout of depression, and hopefully find love again.

She had nothing to lose by trying it with this strange man who was nauseatingly keen on her, and when ReDa explained the address they had on file for him had since been rented out, she opened up her bedsit to George.

George was unemployed, and out of the simulation, Jill’s responsibilities and bills came rolling back in. Within a day she was back at work. He attempted to get some records of the modern era to amuse himself but was met with blank looks and pointed towards his phone, trying to push a digital music service onto him that made him hot with embarrassment because he didn’t understand.

Woolworths was gone, nobody smoked anymore, and when he'd tried to search the newspaper archives for his name at the library he was directed to a computer.

'But I don't know how to use it.'

The librarian looked flummoxed at this, leaning in as if to tell him a secret.

'Have you got a learning disability? The specialist comes in 3-5 on a Friday, they can teach you,' she said sotto voce.

George gave her a sneer and walked defiantly over to the computer, although gave up quickly when he couldn't get the thing to even turn on.

Two months were spent like this. He couldn't pick up anything, not the fancy watch he'd been given nor the mobile phone supposedly essential to everyday living. He even won the £35,000 survey competition yet didn't know how to withdraw and spend it. Jill helped where she could, and they occasionally got to go to dinner or the park, although she always looked vaguely embarrassed to be out with him. He was becoming miserable, longing for their 70's honeymoon period.

One morning, trying to be helpful he began clearing out a heap of junk mail Jill had on her desk, and instead he found himself floating out of the front door, to the station and on board an electric train, so dazed he didn't even pay. The car was dense with bodies, as was the street, and he could feel his blood pressure spiking at the claustrophobia of it all, his brain unhelpfully painting over them with the calm streets of 70's Guildford. The stations were all unfamiliar to him bar one, New Station, using the business card to get back to the ReDa building.

He stood uneasily in the lobby, the receptionist looking up to him with a practised smile.

'Good morning sir, can I help you?'

'George Moodley.' George said, not knowing anything else. He handed over Tyrece's card. She looked at the card, then back to George, before mumbling into an intercom built into her desk.

'Please take a seat Mr. Moodley.'

George made his way over to one of the sofas but didn't get to even bend his knees before Tyrece Lewis materialised from a door behind the reception desk, arm outstretched. He led George through to his cupboard office again, sales brochures spread across his desk invitingly.

George sat opposite Tyrece at the desk, thumbing through a brochure with THE 1990S written in a whacky font.

'What's brought you to my office today Mr. Moodley?'

‘Why is this not working out? I thought it would, with her by my side, but this world, I don’t know. This world just doesn’t fit, everyone’s using mouthpieces all the time, they don’t even look where they’re going. I’ve spent more quality time with the television than her.’

Tyrece said nothing, leaving George to sigh wistfully.

‘George, we’ve been over this before but I will explain. You became a member here in 2028, we were still in our infancy. You chose the early 2000s for starters, you met a girl, you gave it a try for 3 weeks out of the sim before you were back here. You tried the 1840’s, the 1950’s, so many different decades, you met girls in all of them, and yet it didn’t matter, they never lived up out here to what they did in there. You’ve been here so long, you’re our only gold member.’

‘And the name? George Moodley? I couldn’t find a scrap of information about me at the library.’

‘I’m guessing you signed up anonymously; it’s a name you chose. I don’t know if you were looking to keep the Retro Dating experience a secret from someone, but I don’t think we’ll ever know now. You don’t remember, and after two years of this I don’t think you ever will. You’ve forgotten how to cope.’

George was beginning to space out. How could he be sure Mr. Lewis was telling the truth? Nothing rang true anymore, not Harper or Jill, not Retro Dating, gold memberships or any of it.

‘What do I do?’ He looked to Tyrece, who shrugged gravely.

George got up and did a circuit of the room, purple beads in his vision, feeling as wonky as he did his first day in 1978, flushing hot and cold. He could hear echoes of this scenario before, his own voice throwing out years to try.

*What about 1940? Can I try 1990? Could I give 1966 a whirl?*

His brain felt like it was bleeding, he wanted to be anywhere from here. He locked eyes with a noir poster on the far wall, a glamour girl with red lipstick grinning at him besides a well-dressed gentleman, a speech bubble below yelling ‘EXPERIENCE THE ROARING TWENTIES!’ It occurred to him, he *could* be anywhere from here, away from this broken brain and this weird time.

He turned back decidedly to Tyrece.

‘2030 isn’t for me. What about 1920? Art deco, flapper girls, etcetera. I want to give it a whirl.’

‘Are you sure Mr. Moodley? What about Ms. Alligood?’

‘She seems pretty settled here and got plenty of competition money to keep her going. I’m starting to wonder if I ever loved her at all.’



'We can implant memories for you that will make the last few weeks feel like nothing but an abnormal dream. We can't erase anything I'm afraid.'

'Doesn't bother me, I have a memory like a sieve, according to you. I'll forget it all by myself.'

'Please accept my deepest apologies.' Tyrece could tell George was becoming snarky, and with the coolest apology he could muster he reached for a box on the floor, presenting George with a new set of blue pyjamas, and led him to his engraved simulation pod.

'How about being woken up in the cinema by a charming young girl at the end of your favourite 1920's film? Do you know much about the twenties?'

'Not a thing. Choose for me, I'll pick it up as I go along, I'm sure.'

'Okay Mr. Moodley. Inside your pod please.'

George lay down on the plush interior of his vertical pod, lid automatically closing. His brain jarred between memories of Reading festival and Harper, snapshots of a different, unnamed woman, then another, and another, jumbled and torn. All memories serenely melted away as a sweet voice began to envelop him.

'Hey, mister, wake up.'

*Affection*

There's a quiet beauty in the way that a hand slides smoothly into mine. The city is bustling, getting from one destination to another is a war made only harder by the dropping temperatures that the dark brings. It's a stark contrast to the gentleness of the touch of my friend. We're both anxious of the late hour, and no matter how busy the streets are, there's an unspoken awareness between the two of us in how dangerous nights are for young women.

Her hand is small and warm and comforting. We're both slightly tipsy, causing unwarranted confidence, our inebriated states egging each other on as we stumble down the street. We giggle at nothing, glance at the sky to stare at the stars only to trip over our own feet, then start giggling again. There's an honest emotion that seems too tremendous to name. A steadfast current running – so dutiful and unwavering – at the basis of our friendship that I only ever feel when I'm with her. It makes me feel safe, even when the buzz of alcohol makes it harder for us to dodge the unwanted hands of men. Like I could conquer the world as long as I held her hand in mine.

We make it to the tube station amongst a crowd of football fans. It seems almost idiotic that we decided to go out drinking the same day as a match, but vodka has never made me sharp, so the dullness of my senses makes the rowdiness of the bunch almost enjoyable. It's easy to get caught up in the pride and exuberance of the group, so we laugh when they sing, and sing when we know the words. There's a point in the journey where two boys grab our hands and pull us from our seats, only to spin us around and dance to an offbeat tune and I'm not even sure they know what they're singing. We turn and turn and turn until I can taste the alcohol again and maybe this wasn't a good idea but I'm laughing and I'm dancing and I'm living. So I don't stop. I pull my partner closer and we dance some more.

My heart breaks a little when the time comes for us to part. It's comical that a twenty-minute love story would cause such distress, nevertheless I feel colder when we step off the train, like a part of me was left on it. It's an arduous climb up the tube escalators that never seem to work. The tiles are dirty and the posters are so old that they've begun to rot and when I point this out to my friend, she laughs and says it feels like home.

It's nearing two in the morning by the time we reach our apartment. Our small sanctuary that we light with candles and decorate with fake plants and cacti because there's no chance we could keep anything that needed regular care alive. We fall back onto the sofa in practiced synchrony, laughing gently at the fading memories of the evening. Sleep begins to cloud me and I'm content with the idea that we'll both probably wake up with headaches. Her hand slips into mine again, all soft and warm. Even with my eyes closed, I see her smile.

## Forgiveness

It's 10:50 in the morning and I'm sitting by a round table with five or so of my colleagues; there is little quality in the conversation, so losing myself in my thoughts becomes more entertaining. I look over my shoulder. I'm nosy, and even though I try to squash the urge, I begin to judge those around me. It's a nasty habit, and I shame myself immediately, so I turn back and laugh along with whatever one of my colleagues has said. It's a menial task, like I am practiced in fake laughing, fake smiling, fake everything. Stretching my mouth wide, squinting my eyes, shaking my head. It's an art form. I am happier now than I was, fake laughing turns into something real, but a weight that feels a hundred years old still presses on my shoulders.

I look behind me again – anything to satisfy my curiosity – and my eyes meet with an observer in the most blatant display of awkwardness. What's a word for someone who used to be your friend but now you can barely look them in the eye? There should be a word for that, when the words 'old friend' are too raw, and 'acquaintance' is so vague that it seems offensive to the friendship that you once shared. I regret every action and every choice that I made that lead to the end of our friendship. I would give everything I own to have the courage to say the things that are left unsaid, each unspoken verse adding to the eternal mass building on my shoulders.

Each day passes with the same monotonous attitude of a clock, moving through the days as if I'm wading through neck deep water, struggling to even breathe. On my worst days, a feeling I can only describe as numbness wells up within me, trapping my lungs and shrouding my skin, making me feel nothing at all, yet everything at once. Those days I struggle to find the difference between real emotions and what my mind is telling me to feel. On my better days I somehow find happiness in the most mundane of things – like the sun setting a little lower and casting a golden hue over everything the light touches, so insubstantial that something so dirty as my skin would poison it if I were to reach out and just, touch. But there's a building sensation in me so akin to suffocation yet moves with such lethargy that I become used to the idea of what feels like a slow death. There's still an awareness that this feeling is no longer normal.

My job used to give me small doses of happiness, perhaps because it was separate from everything else that I knew. I used to like the way that my colleague's would shout my name enthusiastically as a way of greeting, the way that the boy in the back would smile and say hello with his strong accent and broken English. He says my name one time and in that fleeting moment nothing will ever sound so sweet again. Now the shouting is too loud and I can't muster

up enough enthusiasm too reply with similar vigour, and drunk customers get too close and heckle me for more beer, and my name means nothing to them.

That afternoon I leave work with such haste that I'm selfishly unaware of the people around me. It's bitterly cold, so cold that I can see the rising condensation as I breathe. Yet it's still light outside and I am acutely reminded that this is my favourite season. I am surrounded by reds and golds, coveted by an unassailable breeze that whips my hair across my eyes whilst the cloud cover causes an eerie glow across my vision. I hear laughter behind me and the magic of the scene is interrupted by the knowledge that I am not alone anymore and must share the beauty of my surrounding. I turn around. It's her. The 'not acquaintance', the 'not old friend'. She's standing with some of her friends, and for once I'm grateful that my relevance in her life now is so insignificant that she has no need to acknowledge me. Yet I still stare at her. The clouds part behind her, the sun shines through and she turns her face towards the brightness like a sunflower yearning for the light, and her whole being illuminates. She's beautiful, I think; I wonder if she knows I still believe that.

It would be so easy to just apologise. Perhaps my mentality would surely appreciate the effort I put into not feeling so inferior around others. The idea of forgiving myself might come to me more easily when someone else forgives me first. It would be so enlightening for me to just reach out and say sorry.

But I don't.

*The lake*

The blue hue from the sky reflected itself on the wet leaves of the trees of the forest. No birds were chirping, and no twigs could be heard snapping from the weight of some forest critter. On this particular day, however, the silence was being increasingly broken. From a distance, a metallic noise echoed between the trees, reminiscent of that of a wind chime on a particularly windy day. The noise came ever closer and before long a little girl on a bike appeared on one of the dirt roads that pierced through the forest. The noise came partly from the metallic squeaking of the wheels, and partly from some tiny wooden beads that she had placed on the spokes of the wheels without her mother's knowledge. The girl's face was scrunched up in concentration. Her once white dress was covered in mud and her little arms and legs were bruised and scraped. Her face was dirty and her hair full of twigs. She was muttering incomprehensibly to herself. The bike slipped away from beneath her and she found herself amongst mud and twigs. She got up, brushed herself off, and picked up her bike. 'Lisa? You know what I think of you taking the road through the forest?' She mocked her mother's voice under her breath, 'It might be dangerous.'

Lisa thought it was quite funny how reluctant her mother had been to get her a bike. It wasn't ladylike to own a bike, she had said, but Lisa knew that was just an old fashioned view on things. More and more women were beginning to ride bikes, and she wanted to ride one to school. Luckily, she could be quite persuasive and had finally been bought a bike on her thirteenth birthday earlier that year, on the condition that she'd be careful and learn to ride it gracefully.

Careful and graceful, were two things Lisa had not been today. If she weren't so confused as to where she was, she would have been quite scared of how her mother would react upon seeing the state of her. Straight ahead the track she was on divided into two. She looked around for any familiar signs then scratched the back of her head with her free hand. The track to her right tapered off between the droopy, mould-smelling leaf trees, taking a right turn way in the distance. The track to her left, took a sharp left turn almost instantly. Even though she wasn't sure where she was, she glanced to the left. Both tracks had the same crummy old trees, the same amount of mud, the same overwhelming silence. Even so, it was as if a force was pulling her attention to the left track. She felt her body weight shift to her left leg, the bike leaned with her. 'I must be mad.' she muttered shaking her head. She had a feeling that the left track was better, but she couldn't say what made her think so. There was certainly no logic behind it. The left track

looked just like the right one and yet, every time she thought about it, the left track seemed infinitely more attractive. The handles on the bike turned towards the left and she started skidding through the mud, toward it.

People in the village had told stories about the forest for as long as she could remember, the stories that people told consisted of the usual superstitions; some people believed that there lived magical creatures amongst the trees, some people said that the dead haunted it because of an old curse, while others held the view that if you stayed too long in there you would run into death himself. Lisa didn't believe any of that, although she would very much like to believe it. She thought that the only reason people made up stories was so that they could explain why no wild animals wanted to inhabit the forest, she herself thought that the most logical explanation was that it was just a really rotten old forest that no animal in its right mind would even consider making their home. And she didn't mind the silence, at least she wouldn't have to be scared of being attacked by a bear or a wolf while taking the shortcut through the woods on her way to and back from school.

The track to the left looked the same as the one she had just left behind. Muddy, slippery, silent, complete with a pungent smell of compost. Slipping through the mud, she walked on as fast as she could, dragging her bike next to her. The wheels of the bike were so covered in the thick greyish paste that she had given up on being able to ride it on her way back, the wheels were barely even spinning anymore. She turned the corner sharply and then came to a full stop. In front of her on the track, a figure was running away from her. Lisa's heart was pounding loudly in her ears. She knew that brown striped suit and the boater hat with the black ribbon around it. The man slowed down, then walked a few steps and then came to a stop. Despite the thick mud on the trail, his appearance was impeccable. His shoes weren't even muddy! He turned his head back towards her and her eyes met his. There was no mistaking those kind eyes and the brown moustache. It was her father. She could still remember the tickle of the moustache on her forehead when he used to kiss her goodnight. It was almost three years now since she had felt that. In his right hand was the brown pipe; the house still had a faint smell of pipe tobacco. The man winked at her, then started walking away from the trail and disappeared amongst the trees.

Lisa threw her bike to the side and started running. She was slipping constantly and almost fell head first onto a great big rock in a trench. Despite this, she had a big smile beaming from her face. For a moment she forgot all about being lost and trying to keep her clothes clean. She had found her father! She took off in between the trees where she thought she'd seen her father go

and was instantly much faster than before. The ground beneath her was now moist and covered in moss, much easier to run on. Every now and then she had to break off a few branches in her way. It didn't look like anyone had been there for a very long time. In front of her, a body of water emerged from behind the trees. She slowed down a bit. Thus far, she had trusted her gut feeling, but her gut feeling was telling her to get into the water. 'You are mad.' she whispered to herself. 'You'll get pneumonia...'. As she was thinking this, she felt the water surround the toes on her right foot, then the whole foot, filling her shoe with water. Then the left foot and the left shoe. The bottom of the lake was covered with tiny sharp pebbles, she winced at the pain they invoked as they got into her shoes. Her body got more and more immersed in the water, but when she was in waist deep she stopped. The further out she'd gone, the heavier she felt her mind becoming and she was now scared to go any further. Her eyes were tearing up. Just a few moments ago a smile had grazed her face. She didn't recognise these sad feelings at all. Then, a sweet, faint, voice started speaking inside her head. 'Congratulations, child! You have shown great determinedness in pursuit of your past, I will now show you your life's deepest regret...'. From beneath, a bright orange light shone up from the bottom of the lake and projected itself in a circle on the surface of the water right in front of her. In the circle she could see her father, on the day he disappeared.

Lisa had just been finishing her porridge; her dad was about to leave for work. 'Lisa, you're scoffing down your porridge all too quickly, it's not ladylike.' She had been stressed because she was getting late for school. 'I'm sorry, father! I'm a bit late.' She bolted up from her chair and started gathering her things. 'Not too busy for a kiss good-bye from your old father, are you?' Lisa's mother had overheard the conversation and came into the kitchen. 'You know that you have a book by the stove, Lisa? And aren't you at least going to answer you father?' Lisa turned to look by the stove, and indeed, she had misplaced one of her books there. 'I'm sorry.' She said. 'I really am late for school.' She grabbed her bag, put the book inside with a violent motion and darted toward the door.

Tears were now running down her cheeks, dripping and mixing into the water beneath her. The projection had frozen on a frame where she had her back turned on her parents, the two of them exchanging looks of disappointment. That was the last time she'd seen her father. That moment had haunted her ever since, she was convinced that she was responsible for her father's disappearance. If only she'd been more ladylike, if only she'd been more graceful, if only she'd been more appreciative of him, then maybe he wouldn't have left her. She could taste the salt as she licked the last few tears off her lips. The light dimmed. She started waddling back to dry land



and in time sat down on the moss by the edge of the water. Still consumed by sadness, she looked around. She was completely alone; the forest was as silent as always.

As if waking up from a dream, she slowly regained her senses. Her feet were bleeding from the sharp rocks in her shoes. She hadn't realised how bad it was until the pain started kicking in. Along with the pain came another feeling: excitement. What an extraordinary thing she'd just experienced! What was the purpose of this lake? Was this a clue to find her father? She had been wrong about the forest and she was happy to admit that to herself. 'I have to tell someone about this!' She thought to herself. 'I can't show it to just anyone, I can only show it to someone who will believe me and who can help me understand what it means. Maybe this is how I find him!' She lay back in the moss and in that moment she didn't care that the rotten smell of the moss was seeping into the layers of her dress.

'Lisa, you really can't expect me to believe this mad story of yours!' Lisa was dragging her mother by the arm, through the forest. She had feared at first that she wouldn't be able to find her way home but her gut feeling had led the way. With that same gut feeling, she was now navigating toward the lake. If only her mother could be quiet for once. 'And where's your bike? I asked you to stay away from the forest and yet here you are! And what on earth have you done to your dress?' Lisa sighed. 'I've already apologised for not doing as I was told. And I've already told you about the bike and the dress.' Lisa gripped her mother's wrist even tighter as she realised how close they were now.

'Well, we're here now!' Lisa said proudly, and let go of her mother's wrist. Her mother looked unamused as she took in the surroundings. 'You've dragged me all this way to see... a foul smelling lake?' Lisa, patiently replied: 'This is a lake of sorrows, mother. Father showed me the way but then I couldn't find him. When you go into the water, it shows you the thing you regret most! I saw father on the day he disappeared; it must be a clue! I thought you could try and perhaps—' Lisa's mother interrupted her with a slap across her cheek. 'You've really gone mad haven't you, child!' It wasn't as much a question as a statement. Bitter tears started rolling down in streaks on Lisa's dirty face. 'I just want to know where he is, I thought you would understand!' she mumbled through the sobbing. 'I understand as much as that your father's disappearance has taken a bigger toll on your well being than I—' Lisa was out of patience. As her mother was talking, she charged and with all the power she had in her body she pushed her mother into the lake. The mother's scream as she met the cold water echoed through the otherwise silent terrain. Lisa's mother opened her mouth as if to say something but stopped herself and started twirling in

the water looking all around her. Then she covered both of her ears with her hands. 'Get out of my head, get out of my head...' she whispered repeatedly. Then, the same orange light that Lisa saw just an hour before appeared again, shooting up from the bottom of the lake. Lisa hunched down to put a finger into the water and watched with excitement as the scene unfolded on the surface on the water.

There were three firm knocks on the door of the house. Lisa's mother had been preparing to pickle some eggs when the knocks had interrupted her. She put down the jar she was holding and went to answer the door. 'Hello, Mrs. Wilson. I don't believe we've met. I'm a colleague of your husband's. Bernard Johnson?' Lisa's mother smiled at the guest. 'Oh, Mr. Johnson. Yes, my husband has mentioned you. Would you like a cup of tea? Be so kind and come inside!' Mr. Johnson nodded and said, 'That's very kind of you but I'm afraid my nerves are a bit frazzled, do you happen to have anything stronger? And please, call me Bernard.' The two of them sat down in the kitchen and Lisa's mother poured Bernard a glass of whiskey. 'Well, I suppose you'll want to know why I'm here. I've been sent to tell you that your husband has had a terrible accident at work.' The smile washed away from the mother's face, along with any trace of colour. After a few moments of silence she said, 'Where is he?' Bernard tried to speak, but the mother interrupted him. 'I need to see him.'

When Lisa came home from school that day, her mother was sitting in the kitchen. She could see her daughter emerge from behind the pelargoniums in the kitchen window. In a few seconds, the daughter would be coming through the door and the mother would have to tell her the news. The door flung open, and the daughter came rushing in. It only took Lisa one look at her mother to understand that something terrible had happened. Her mother's eyes were swollen and red and she looked as if she had all life drained out of her. 'Mother? Is everything alright?' The mother looked into her daughter's eyes and said: 'I wish I could say that it was... Your father didn't show up for work this morning, I don't know where he might be.' The last sentence echoed in Lisa's head. She stared at the orange light until there was no light left.

*The lake*

The circles echoed out from every teardrop that crashed into the glistening water. She watched as the vibrations spread across the lake and slowly faded, erasing the evidence of any disturbance. She had a sudden thought. *What if the water screamed every time something fell into it?* She imagined the dying ripples would sound like piercing screams each one descending lower in pitch until the sound became so deep it faded into the normal buzzing of everyday life. A noise that would blur in with the static in the air, the static of life that is constantly vibrating, anyone can hear it if they take the time to listen.

The lake resembled a jar of blurry solution, one that was used to clean dark blues and rich greens off an artist's paintbrush. As she stood waist deep in the lake, with hair clinging to her face she thought she might resemble that paintbrush. Although the bruises on her hands revealed she may not be able to capture the magic of the lake in painting herself.

When she was younger, about five or so, her teachers would always scold her for snapping her pencils in half. She was told she was too heavy handed and that she would have to learn to be gentle. She found it odd they always assumed she broke things by accident. The feeling of the material crumbling and falling apart beneath her palms made her feel powerful. She never told them she liked the way the wood never snapped completely in two but splintered leaving exposed jagged edges.

She let herself pretend that he was just another pencil. An inanimate object. Nothing to cry over. Although she knew she must hide the evidence of her destruction, like how she once hid her stash of broken pencils in this very lake. By now the wood must have clumped into a pile of mulch and the graphite turned to powder like ash. She had kept a small splinter from every pencil she broke as a child, just a reminder, a fun hobby like a rock or shell collection.

She waded through the water and crawled her way out of the lake, leaving the faintest trail of bubbles behind where she had stood. As her feet touched the muddy ground she pinned back the clingy mass of hair beside her eye with her shiny new necktie pin.

*Children of the wastes*

The sky was sullen, as if it was suffering. The clouds were a brownish-grey, blocking out the sun that people had never seen. Although, who knew if they were clouds, or just pollution? Pollution from a time long ago; where people lived and died in the Golden Age. If only they had known the consequences their pollution was going to bring to their world.

Garó lowered his head and continued home. He gazed down as the rain splattered the mud, dissolving the tracks his old cloak left behind him. Around him, shanty hut houses were pinned up with corrugated iron, mesh, and wooden planks. Anything they could scavenge to create a shelter. He was in the settlement now, so there were a few of these homes on either side of him. Ahead of him lay a much larger, more sophisticated shack, and it even had several rooms. He had spent his life continuously making it bigger, more habitable for others.

Several little devices were planted on the outside of the large shack, little doodads and gadgets. Garó was fifty now, and his age came with a price. A ticking bionic limb replaced his left leg and it had seemed to be playing up recently. Even still, he would repair and upgrade the house whenever he needed to make space. A waterwheel was attached next to the house, churning filthy muddy water. A motorcycle made from scrap sat outside the house. He stared at it as he hobbled past. *Odd*, he thought. *Somebody's been on it*. The scrap-cycle looked modified. He strode up to his shack's door.

A chorus of little young voices flew at him when he approached.

'Garó! Eight – no, nine children scrambled out of the little block of shacks he had made. 'Garó's back!' They had flocked to him and were either hugging him, or jumping up and down, waiting their turn. He was a father figure to them, these poor kids. They should never have been left out in the wastes in the first place. But he had rescued them, brought them back here, and raised them.

As they held his waist, he had to shake them off. 'Ah, c'mon now. Easy now. C'mon, guys!' He burst out laughing. 'Ge'off!' Freeing himself from them, he sprinted towards the door, and his hoard of kids followed. 'Easy now, guys, it's fragile.' They all knew he had something to show them, so they sat down, eager to listen, even though they had been playing all day and were somewhat exhausted. 'Wait, hold on...Kimee, Gazmo, Lara, Marly, Orlan, Brytan, Curly, Whismo and Jess... Children, where's your oldest sister?'

Gazmo, who was the youngest, splayed his hands out, gesturing his confusion.

‘Tsk, guys... *Max!*’

‘MAXI, COME TO THE FRONT ROOM.’ A few of the little ones yelled with him.

Gazmo was six years old, but the rest of the kids ranged between seven and twelve. Maxi was the oldest, at fourteen, and she did as she pleased when he left the house. Garo quietened everyone, feeling a bit sheepish, as she came into the front room.

‘I was making *dinner*. Okay?’ Maxi came through the wrought iron door. She sported a pink cap, with grease and oil staining it. Her denim clothing was battered and was a hand-me-down from when humanity still made clothes.

‘Food’s ready when you want it. Generator was messing up, so I gave it a kick and, well, the generator’s up now, so that’s all that matters. Also, there was a problem with the water filter? I think it’s looking good now, but won’t be able to tell for sure unless one of these lot gets sick...’ She looked around, half amused, but also half worried.

‘Uh-uh-uh,’ Garo interrupted. ‘You have done enough today, young lady.’ Fiddling with a switch and seeing it spark, he nodded and smiled slightly. ‘Ah... yes, excellent. I hadn’t forgotten, just... distracted. Yeah.’

Maxi sat, with the others crowding around Garo. He ushered them in and put his fingers to his lips. He gestured that he was going to show them something. This made them go quiet.

‘Now! What do we have here?’ He pulled out a gadget of some kind, a weird spindly metal object that whirred and beeped with a dull red light. It had two ‘arms’ on either side, which looked badly crushed. The whirring kept starting only to stop again and it sounded as if the device was in pain.

Marly waved her hand. ‘Well, what does it doooo?’ she almost sang.

Garo’s entire posture dropped. Scratching his head, he said: ‘I don’t exactly know yet... but your sister here, she might be able to help me out.’

‘It looks broooooooken!’ Gazmo whined, imitating his sister’s voice. A few of the other kids agreed, chiming in behind him.

‘Hey, guys, easy now, c’mon, give me a break. This thing wasn’t easy to find, you know.’ Some of the kids, getting bored, got up. ‘Hey, I would love to see one of you guys go out into the wastes! Yeah, yeah, go on. Wait, you really going? Kimee? Curly, c’mon...even you, Curly?’

Curly gave him a cheeky look and ran off with the others. Only Maxi had stayed, wandering up to Garo.

‘You can’t blame them. They can smell what I’m cooking in there.’

‘I’m surprised they aren’t running away from it instead.’

‘Of course you would say that. You wish you could cook like me, is all.’

‘Oh, *please*, girl. Who taught you how to cook?’

‘You called *that* cooking?’ Maxi laughed. ‘I’m surprised your cooking didn’t kill me when I was young!’

Garo just laughed. She could have this one. ‘So, Maxi, I want you to have a look at this device for me. It looks like a key or processor or something.’

Maxi was sceptical. She looked at him, bemused. ‘Like a key! Or a processor. Or something. Really? That’s what you’ve given me to work with?’

‘I don’t know all the tech mumbo-jumbo terms. But from what I’ve seen of Golden Age tech, they usually have three main areas. Energy, to run the device. A processor, which tells that energy what to do; then a functional use of that energy. You know we used to power a device to make water hot, *just* to wash our clothes?’

Maxi looked at him like he was insane. ‘*What?* Golden Age humans were crazy!’

‘*Right!?* So much waste...’ He went from sounding passionately angry to disturbingly low.

Maxi could tell this meant a lot to Garo, poor guy. He had taught her everything she knew, after all. She just seemed to have a knack for Golden Age tech. Garo was always dumbfounded by her apparent inherent abilities. She got up, and strode toward him. He had his head in his hands. ‘Go on, give it.’

‘Hmm?’ he said, looking up.

‘Give,’ she said again, but with more emphasis.

He looked at the device, puzzled. He weighed it up before passing it over to her. Before he gave it to her, he looked her in the eye. ‘Maxi, please. I don’t know where we will get another one. All my years scavenging and this is the first of its kind. Please keep it safe, okay?’

‘Pfft! What am I going to do? Give it to Gazmo?’

Garo guffawed. ‘That little trouble maker, who knows – he could turn the whole settlement upside down without knowing it!’

She dangled it playfully, to tease him. ‘Who knows...I could drop it in the water wheel...or—ooh, ooh! Maybe the Wastemen will come? Who knows, Garo!’

‘Maxi, stop. There’s no way the Wastemen would hear about this.’

‘Oh yeah? Who’s going to stop them?’

Garo had stopped laughing and was shaking his head.

She calmed down. ‘What’s up, old man?’

‘There’s so much you don’t know, Maxi.’

‘About what?’

‘About here! About the world we live in, Maxi. Look up! Do you see the sky? You don’t. That’s toxicity. We used to live in a clean world. Blue skies, clear water, green plants. All of that

changed when humanity fell. It fell into a lawless society where there are no rules. Just scavenging. Trying to survive. These settlements are the closest thing to a society we have. Now it's kill or be killed. Scrap or be scrapped.'

'Garo, I'm not afraid of the Wastemen.'

'You should be. Wastemen will take from anyone, anywhere. Even in this lawless world, they are criminals.'

'Tch. They better not come across me!' Maxi jumped up, patting her hand with the wrench she always carried around.

'Maxi, so help me if you ever come across one of them... I've heard some disturbing rumours about them. Their diet of 'whatever comes their way' has left them with some unsuspecting side effects. I know usually they leave communities alone, strength in numbers an all, but just be extra careful, eh?'

Little did he know she *may* have accidentally, quite literally, run into a couple Wastemen on the scrap-cycle. What could she say? She liked to hunt for scrap parts too.

'Anyway, back to the device, do you think you could, maybe...?' Garo strung the words out. 'I've got a leg to work on.'

'You don't have to say a thing,' replied Maxi. 'I got this.'

She hung her wrench on her belt, grabbed the device, and left. She was heading to her workbench, which was in a small room at the back out the shack-house. It was quite humid, from all her little steam-based gadgets. It was in here where she had finished that bike. A few weapon modifiers here and there, just in case. She had repaired a few other pieces of Golden Age tech, but didn't understand their purpose.

Maxi placed the device on her workbench. *Incredible*, she thought. *What lengths did Garo go to get this?* She had no idea how it had survived all this time. It was comprised of rare metals. This device should be able to do things she hadn't seen before. She got to work on repairing it. The 'arms' were the most damaged. Parts were fragile or broken altogether, which she could fix with flux. A few hours passed, and it got dark; she worked well into the night. She fell asleep just after repairing the core.

The girl awoke after a few hours to the sound of Whismo and Orlan arguing again. She got to her feet; no point trying to get back to sleep now. She looked at the bench and saw the device—the device! She grabbed it and ran into the main room. Garo was up and stretching, apparently disturbed by the noise too.

'Garo, look! I repaired it.'

Garo blinked a couple times before focusing on the device.

‘You see how the arms actually fold back, like this? Then the core—there’s this bit, see? And then if you wind this back...’

Garo pulled his head back in shock. ‘Magnificent.’ The arms of the device had folded up and pulled back. The circular core had extended in the same direction.

‘It’s like a key.’

The old man pulled his spectacles up to his face to examine it. ‘Great Scott...I think I’ve seen this before, I think...maybe.’ He sat down and thought about it.

‘Well, what is it?’

He said nothing.

‘Aren’t you going to tell me?’

‘Quiet! I’m trying to think.’ He sat, stroking his chin, gazing downwards.

A minute passed. Maxi tapped her feet. A few more minutes rolled by. Maxi sat down, thinking of her bed. Suddenly, the old man sprung up.

‘My sister—ow!’ He had leapt up too fast, and his ticking leg sparked out. Garo crashed down, landing on his knee. His leg still needed repairs. ‘Bleeding ‘eck!’

Maxi helped him up and back onto the sofa-like seat. As she did, Garo continued talking. ‘The device, I think she knows what it can do.’

The older girl propped him up, so his leg could rest. She was turning, running to get his toolkit before he could ask. When she returned, he was talking between sharp bursts of pain.

‘You need to go—ah! Go and see my sister—ack!’ One of the mechanical parts had twisted where it met his skin, and it looked painful. Occasionally it would spark, causing him pain. A glob of gooey liquid was slowly seeping out.

‘What about you?’

‘I’ll be fine. I would go, but, you know...’ He motioned to his leg; he continued to speak through sharp breaths. ‘My sister lives south of the Badlands, you’ve met her before, but you were too little to remember. I should be able to patch myself up in a day or two, but just in case, she’ll know how to help me.’ He said with a groan. ‘She’ll take one look at that thing, and she’ll know what to do. Just get there safely.’

Maxi looked down at the device on the table. *Maybe it was important*, she thought. Garo did seem really happy to find it, and she had never seen anything like it. *What about his sister?* He rarely talked about her. He mentioned they stayed away from each other, something about disagreeing about the clans. Besides, her choosing to live south of the Badlands? Talk about causing a gap, but she could go today? It was early still, which meant she would have plenty time to get back without running into Wastemen. Although Garo said he was fine, that injury looked



pretty grim. It was only because of his smarts Garo had survived to his age. The sooner Garo's sister could look at it, the better.

Maxi rushed off and went downstairs, grabbing anything she may need. She placed everything in her backpack and went to say goodbye to Garo. She walked past a few of the little ones on the way and kissed them on their foreheads. Garo was tightening his mechanical leg as she came back in.

'Alright, old man, I'm off.'

'Eager, are we?' He wanted to appear fine, but she saw right through him. She had been with him since she was a baby. Some of the other kids he had adopted were already three or four years old when he found them. He didn't have favourites, but Maxi was different, special in her own way.

'Relax, Garo. Don't miss me too much.' She smiled as she left.

Maxi shut the door behind her, making sure it was securely locked. She wandered to her scrap-cycle and checked the modifications. On either side, two scrap shooters had been placed. The ammunition was stored into the bike. It would make it heavier and slower, but she felt a lot safer. The wastes were getting worse; with resources in the Badlands clearing up, Wastemen had to travel further out to scavenge. She would have to be careful.

She hopped on and geared up, loving the sounds of the familiar roar. Hitting the acceleration, she yelled with glee, and raised the front of the bike upwards in a wheelie. She sped out of the settlements, breezing by shacks, and raising a cloud of dust behind her. She headed for a mound of junk she knew she could go up.

From the top, she hit the brakes, surveying the landscape. To the north grew black spires of the desecrated cities, still smoking from the pollution fires; they were inhabitable, at least for normal men. To the east sat most of the settlements, she couldn't see far, as she wasn't high up, so she couldn't make out her shack, large as it was. The rest was a bleak dark grey brown hazy landscape.

Maxi was aiming for the Badlands, so she was headed west, the opposite direction to she had come from. Her bike sped up as she flew down the mound; she twisted and turned it to avoid rubble. She would have to go around most of the Badlands, in hope of avoiding Wastemen. Usually, she was confident she could outpace them on the bike, as Garo has taught her, but she wanted to be safe.

She drove for a while, avoiding the mounds of junk. She passed a few single homes: outliers that lived on the borders between scavengers and settlers. A few stared at her as she flew by. *A bit odd, but not dangerous*, she thought. For a while, she passed nothing, and just enjoyed the

breeze in her hair. She thought about the possibilities the device could have and wondered why Garo was so excited. She accelerated.

She reached the barrens, where the world was truly lawless. She veered to one side and took a route that was stalked less. She relaxed a little; she would be fine. She was always fine. Her motor hummed as the landscape flew by. But then she could hear another engine. She turned to look back, her goggles catching the dust. There was a large, armoured, scrap-vehicle behind her. She looked around, there was nothing in sight, just junk. But she was being chased by Wastemen. She nervously accelerated her bike.

From behind her, she heard the echo of gears clanking. She turned to look at the vehicle. It grew a long catapult from its back that they were loading flaming junk into. When they released the rope, the catapult flung its flaming junk at her. Thinking she would be fine, she veered to dodge. However, on impact, the junk exploded, going everywhere. A flaming tire skimmed into her, burning her arm. She stifled a painful cry and pushed onwards. Both of her guns were forward facing, so she couldn't fight back. There was no way that vehicle could keep up with her modifications. She started to lose them when she heard a sound. A low, deep horn was being blown; the Wastemen were calling reinforcements.

A few more rounds of junk were thrown at her, forcing her to bob and weave as she drove. *Eventually, they will run out*, she hoped. She glanced to her left and saw that two more armoured vehicles had appeared from junk mounds. She cursed and accelerated more, pushing the bike to its limits. The mounds of junk were flying at her much more frequently now they had numbers. A few shots missed, but a few caused obstacles in her path. She had to veer right suddenly, then brake as another landed in her path before she picked up speed again. She could make it through this. They couldn't land a hit on her in their dreams, and their junk-buckets could never outrun her machine.

But then, from ahead of her, two more Wastemen vehicles appeared from the mounds. She turned her bike to face them to try and get a good shot, but they were too far away to have much impact. Now they were all coming from her right, which meant she was forced to go further left, further south, into the Badlands. They were *herding* her into the Badlands. *If I get caught up in there*, she thought. *I might not even make it to Garo sister's place, let alone back in time to help him.*

Maxi refused to play their game. Aiming her guns at the vehicles ahead of her, she dodged a few more junks of scrap as she got in range. She gripped her left handlebar, as you would to accelerate, but instead of speeding up, a sound of rattling shook the bike as it began shooting off tiny bullets of scrap. Her twin jets of fury pierced the armour of the first vehicle, but it still sped towards her.

She kept shooting as she drove forward. The damaged vehicle gave up on coercing her into the Badlands and aimed its catapult directly at her. She simply veered to her right and carried on shooting. They weren't stopping, but neither was she.

'C'mon,' Maxi growled. 'Just stop, will you!' She kept peppering the machine ahead of her with bullets until finally, it came to a standstill, smoking where it stood. She was going to drive by it and offer a taunt but then she noticed something sparking and drove away from it.

An explosion from the machine erupted behind her.

Maxi skirted behind the other, now on its tail. She could see the Wastemen. The back of the vehicle's door was open, so they could man the catapult. She aimed, and started firing, her bullets landing on the vehicle. It attempted to swerve left and right, but its handling was poor, so she easily stayed on target. Within seconds, her guns had decimated the catapult, so she aimed for the back wheels, which didn't take long and the machine came to a clunky halt. She circled back around, the barrels splayed out around her.

In the direction of her destination lay a chasm. If she could get enough speed, she could close the gap and leave those Wastemen behind. Pushing the bike to its limit again, she accelerated. She flew off a pile of junk and up into the air. Glancing down, she gasped at the drop below. After a second or two of flight, the back wheel landed bumpily on the other side of the rift. Without braking, she turned to look on the other side to see the two Wastemen had given up.

Another hour or so of driving and she reached the edge of the Badlands. She knew she had arrived because her aunt had basically built herself a fort. It was large and rose high up. Crazy, but at least the woman could defend herself. Maxi flew up the ramps, leading her to the main plateau that the fort was built on. She dismounted and walked up to the thick iron doors.

'Auntie? It's Garo's daughter! Hello? H—ah!' She was silenced as one door opened; a hand snapped out and pulled her in, muffling her mouth.

Her aunt was coated in a military-like outfit with a facemask and hood. She was also smeared in grease stains and held a long sniper rifle in one hand. 'Silence, child! What do you want? I've seen you coming from a mile away and heard you even further. Do you want Wastemen crawling around here?' She looked at Maxi sternly, analysing her features, pressing a gloved hand to her chin, turning it to observe the girl. 'I know who you are. I've been expecting Garo to send you to me. What is it he wants?' She finished, raising her eyebrow sharply.

Maxi bit her lip, slightly intimidated. She removed her backpack. She took out the device from the backpack. The little glow of light seemed bright in the room.

She played a hand. 'Name's Anjari, nice to meet you.' Maxi shook her hand; Anjari rolled her eyes and used her free hand to grab the device. Anjari spoke as she walked, seemingly taking Maxi somewhere brighter where she could analyse the device. 'Now this is what I am talking about. Interesting...aha! But is it legitimate?' She pulled a flashlight from her belt. 'And there's the insignia. Perfect!' She turned to look at Maxi. 'Go on, tell him he did a good job.' Maxi didn't move. 'Why are you still here? Oh yes, I've got something for him.'

'Uh...' was all that Maxi could say before Anjari sprinted off.

After a minute or two, she returned with a small pack that had a green cross on it. 'It's a med-pack, for those with augmentations.' She smiled. 'Regular medicine just doesn't always cut it.'

'But how did you—'

'Because, darling,' she interrupted. 'My limbs are playing up too.' She waved her hand upwards, removing a glove. Tiny mechanical contraptions rotated and shifted, allowing her to move her mechanical fingers dynamically, as easily as Maxi could her own.

The girl simply stared, bewildered.

'Don't worry, child. We are fine; tired, but okay.' Anjari started the power, and a hum of electricity filled the air. 'Now, follow me child.' She gestured to Maxi.

They entered and climbed up some stairs. The staircase reached a large engine, glowing red and pumping out steam. The engine carried on upwards. A circular staircase formed around it.

'I've been working on this for decades now. This is why I had to move so far. Needed the space, time, resources. Garo didn't like it; didn't believe I could do it. But they used this machine in the Golden Age, so there's no reason we couldn't follow a schematic.' They followed the staircase around the engine; after a minute, they had reached the top. 'They still used these things. We're just going to get this one activated. First of its kind in 200 years!'

'But what does it do?'

'It's an atmospheric detoxifier.'

Maxi's face didn't change.

'It cleans the air!' The woman placed the device in a slot and turned the core module. It gave a click, and slowly inserted itself. The red glow turned green. The engine went from humming to roaring, pistons pushed, and steam hissed. 'Okay, child, quickly then. Don't want to get burnt!' Maxi sprinted down the stairs. When they reached the bottom, Anjari pushed them outside. 'C'mon, let's see it!'

Her tall fort, which Maxi could now see was a massive chimney, began drawing in the dark brown polluted air and pulled it inside. From the sides, steam and clean air was blown

outwards. The machine activated again, pulling in the dark dirty clouds with immense force. The sky looked a little brighter.

‘Now...now these people will see the true sky. Have you heard of the sun, Maxi?’

Maxi shook her head.

‘We’ll have plenty time to talk on the way back. I’m putting this thing into lockdown.’ She pulled out a remote pointer and pressed a button. Enormous metal bars came from around the building, wrapping it up.

*Give an engineer a decade or two, Maxi thought, and plenty of scrap and there was nothing they couldn’t do. Colour me impressed.* She glanced at the bike and was reminded of Garo. ‘I should hurry back.’

‘Oh, I’m coming too. It’s been a while since I’ve seen the old man. Besides, this project is complete. I want to see my stamp on history from a distance.’

They saddled up and drove towards Garo’s. Anjari explained to Maxi how they wouldn’t need to worry about Wastemen, not with Anjari riding the rear.

‘Whaddya mean?’ Maxi questioned.

‘How many people have you met my age, child?’

‘Aside from Garo, none, I guess.’ Maxi admitted.

‘And you won’t meet many more! Takes a lot of skill to live this old. They know this bad boy.’ She held her rifle upright. ‘Whenever I ride with him, all I have to do is make sure they can see it. Then they know it’s me. They *know* not to mess with us. Lost too many friends to it, I guess.’ She sighed. ‘Still, every now and then, we get some practice in. There’s always one guy who doesn’t know the rules of the road, even after all those years...’ She finished the sentence solemnly.

They continued to talk as they rode, Anjari telling Maxi about the wasteland’s history, the sun, and her plans to clean the sky. She explained why Garo and herself had started together but split for several reasons. It was a couple hours of a drive, but Anjari kept Maxi entertained. When she ran out of stories, they rode in silence. When the settlement came into view, both ladies relaxed, tired from riding.

It was evening time, and the house was a mess. Maxi burst into the main room alone, carrying the med-pack for Garo. She barely had time to pass it to him, before being flocked by an army of kids.

‘Maxi, are you okay?’ Garo asked.

‘I’m fine, the wastemen tried to get me...but let’s just say there are a few less idiots out there causing trouble now.’ She held out her arm, where she was burned. She saw him look

worried and remembered the last time he jumped up. ‘Easy now, I’m okay. We got that pack for your leg.’

‘We?’

Anjari came in behind him, grinning.

‘Anjari, why are you here? Why are you smiling? You never smile...’

‘Come here, brother.’ She bent over to hug him.

‘And we never hug...wait, does this mean...?’

The older woman straightened up and met his gaze. ‘Yes, brother. We’ve done it. Twenty-five years...’ Tears streamed down her cheeks.

‘Hey, don’t forget about me!’ Maxi interrupted. ‘I repaired the dumb thing!’

‘Ah yes, we couldn’t have done it without your star pupil.’

‘So it’s up?’

‘Yes! For a couple of hours now. Shall we take a look?’

‘Course! C’mon kids, help me up!’

A parade of kids came and assisted Garo to stand. Together, the twelve of them hobbled out of the shack. In the distance, where Anjari lived, was a massive gap in the dark, polluted clouds. Clean, blue skies lay in the gap. Everyone gasped in awe.

‘Wow, so that is what it was like...’ Maxi breathed.

Her aunt smiled. ‘Yes, and imagine the whole sky. We’ll get others. More machines. We will rally the people. We can scavenge. We can build. We can clean up this world. And there’s the proof!’

Other people in the settlement had begun leaving their homes and were looking up at the sky in the distance, pointing and shouting.

‘Anjari’s right,’ Garo agreed. ‘Together, we can build a brighter future.’

Maxi looked at the two older people. They were heroes of their time. It wasn’t going to save the world. But it was a start, and that gave people hope. Together, they could clean this land – and that hope was all that they needed.

*Burst pipe*

Silence had dominated their home for a while. Though the daily rituals of domestics were still being performed, the sounds of living, joyous living, were mute. In the quiet, cold kitchen, Tam was emptying the dishwasher. The dishes clinked and tapped when Tam was putting them away, but the silence was in abundance, within Tam at least.

Suddenly, the cold of the kitchen became frosty; Anna had entered. Tam glanced at her, like a guilt-ridden puppy looking for some kind of loving warmth. Anna glared at Tam, she was like a stone-faced judge, her presence brought out a sense of intimidation; her look was one that could fill one's veins with dread.

'Towles, where are the towels?' Anna asked Tam.

'Just tumbling, they'll be done in a few minutes,' said Tam. His voice was shy, broken and with a seasoning of sadness. Anna stood there, waiting for the tumble dryer to finish. Tam kept close to the sink, leaning against it, as if it were a place of sanctuary.

The silence of the kitchen was broken when Tam uttered two words. 'How long?'

'Excuse me!' said Anna, like a drill Sargent, confronted with an insolent private.

'How long before you...,' said Tam

'Before I'm no longer mad with you, how long until I forgive you?' said Anna.

Before Tam could respond, Anna cut him off again.

'You weren't thinking of that when you kissed her,' she said.

'It was a moment of weakness; I don't know what came over me,' said Tam.

'A moment of weakness, is that all you can say, a moment of weakness!' said Anna.

Tam wanted to reply, but he couldn't, how could he respond.

'She was my sister, Tam, my sister! It's bad enough that you're unfaithful, but to kiss her, to make lov— to... do THAT to me with my sister!' said Anna.

Tam was silent, all he could do was hang his head and cross his arms, as if to cradle himself. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

Anna continued to glare at Tam. 'I'm going to run my bath, bring up the towels when they're done,' she said. Anna left the kitchen and marched up the stairs, leaving Tam alone once more.

For a minute or so, nothing happened. Tam was in the kitchen and Anna ran her bath. However, the silence was disrupted once more by the burst of the kitchen sink's pipe.

Upon hearing rushing water, Anna charged down the stairs. She ran into the kitchen. The floor was drenched. Tam had grabbed some flannels, tying them into a knot on the burst pipe.

'Move!' barked Anna, knocking Tam out of the way.

Tam tripped back and slipped on the wet floor, hitting the back of his head upon impact.

Anna turned around sharply. She saw Tam lying on the soaked floor. She walked over to him, crouching beside him to wake him up.

Tam lay still. Anna began to nudge Tam gently, but Tam was still. Soon, Anna frantically shook Tam, desperate to wake him up, but he didn't.

'He's gone Anna, there's no use,' a voice told Anna. She screamed before jumping away from Tam. Anna frantically looked around, trying to find the owner of the voice.

'Anna, try to calm down,' spoke the voice again.

Spooked by the voice, Anna almost slipped on the wet floor before someone grabbed her arm. Anna turned sharply to face the grabber, who was pale, although her skin appeared Arabian. Her eyes were wide, like those of an owl. Her body was beautifully thin and her hair was as blue as a clear night sky. Upon her back was a pair of raven black wings.

Anna was frozen with fear, unable to scream, all she could do was try.

'Anna, I need you to be calm, can you do that for me?' the woman asked.

Anna nodded her head in agreement. 'Who...who are you?' she asked.

'Eresh, my child, I am Eresh. I mean you know harm.'

As Anna was about to speak, Eresh crouched down to examine Tam. 'His story has come to its end my child; it is time for Tam to come with me,' said Eresh.

Anne shivered and her lips trembled upon hearing Eresh's words. 'Come with you? Where are you taking him? Why are you taking him? Why are you even here?' Anna said as her voice was brimming with fear and a little ounce of anger.

'Tam has died, my child, he will no longer walk the earth, for all who die must walk with my kin or I to Irkalla, the country of the dead,' said Eresh.

Anna closed her eyes; she began to breathe heavily as she shook her head in disagreement. 'No...no, no, no, no, there...there has to be another way,' Anna cried as her voice began to crack.

Eresh placed her hand upon Anna's right shoulder and spoke. 'My child, what's done is done, the past cannot be rewritten or undone, you must accept that his time has come.'

Anna hung her head low; she took a deep breath.

Eresh spoke again. 'My child, I know it's hard to accept, but you must let me...'



Before Eresh could continue, Anna screamed and pushed Eresh back. She pounced on Eresh and began to throttle her. 'You're not going to take him, I'll never let you take him!' Anna screamed at Eresh.

'I am...I am not your...enemy.' Eresh struggled to speak, as Anna's hands were wrapped around her throat. Pinned to the ground and with no choice, Eresh extended her wings and swatted Anna, knocking her out.

Anna woke up sometime later. She looked around to find the winged woman, but Eresh was gone. Anna soon turned to face Tam, he still lay there, static like a slice of meat. Anna crawled over to cradle Tam in her arms. Her body shivered, her heart felt heavy, her throat was lumpy, her vision blurred by tears. Anna leaned over and whispered into Tam's ear, 'I love you.'

The End

HUMAIRA PANDOR

*Vibrant sunday*

In the shaking of your voice I heard a million things. The sky's setting sun kept us warm, hid our faces. Suffocated by the evening breeze, the mauve and golden orange besieged our senses. There was a hummingbird skipping on the branches of the old oak tree beside us. Your screeching words like the nails of a hag against a blackboard, sliced it in a thousand shards made of stained glass. Sharp enough to cut the cords of your gullet. Your Versace jeans wore deprivation beautifully. The scent of your perfume was the pus you sweated out on the nights your clammy hands forced alcohol down your mouth. The autumn leaves clanked as they hit the branches of the tree, grating the ground as they reached it. Daisies stood long and proud about my feet; I trampled them with my stilettos. The sounds of children playing rang like the screeches of a slaughterhouse; it taunted me. Lily-pads floating on the surface of the lake resembled the dead bodies that lay buried beneath it.

We lift ourselves up from the park bench as it bleeds into the soil, seeping into the earth like a bird with broken wings in quicksand. Walking past the café I smell a morgue amongst the butter and pastries. The clattering of cutlery sings rattling chains and sharpening of blades. We walk atop the bridge and stand at its centre; beneath us the river flows and groans as it holds the weight of the lily pads. You look at me with those deep brown eyes; your pupils widen. They resemble an archery target and I envision throwing darts in their bull's eyes. You take your rusted hands and set them on my waist, then plunge your tongue into my mouth, cacti gashing my insides. I tear your grip from my body and glance below at the lake and its lily pads. I look at you and you look at me.

The sun had set, and darkness rang across the woodland, across the river and across your face. The lily pads could no longer be seen. I heard my mother call my name as I sat and thought of that day, cross-legged upon my blooded bed, fingers oozing with the words I wish I'd said.

## Prophetic script

*With thanks to Jamaica Kincaid*

don't talk to the animals, they can't comprehend your words and it makes you look silly; your name is too hard for me to pronounce so I'll just call you Mary instead; don't raise your voice, you were given a voice for the sole purpose of keeping it quiet; don't show your legs or you'll attract rapists, do you want to be raped? don't wear makeup, don't be anonymous; wear makeup, the boys won't like you otherwise; don't cover your face, it offends me, let me feast on your face; why are you covering your body? your body is my dinner; don't kiss a girl if you're a girl; don't kiss a boy if you're a boy; kiss a girl if you're a boy; kiss a boy if you're a girl; why is your skin darker than mine? I think it's because you're less evolved than me; why must you persist on talking to the animals? they can't see your labels; don't look at that man who asks for money; he's not one of us; he's not even a man; what is a man? what is a woman? make dinner when you get home from work; your lack of testicles means you're less intelligent than I; look at this; watch that; don't look at this; don't watch that; buy those items; buy more; that's not enough; you don't have enough; don't stop buying them or else you'll realise you're sad; this area of the earth wasn't intended to be your home; are you blind to the hand drawn lines on a map? that dress covers too much of you; that dress covers too little of you; why aren't you married yet?

do what they are doing; don't do what they are doing; you're not from here so you must be poor; what was my doctors name again? shave off your facial hair, that wasn't assigned to your gender; never hit a woman; it's okay to hit a man because a woman's hand is softer than a man's hand and a man's body is more resilient to pain than a woman's body; don't stay at home and raise your children yourself, you'll be looked down upon by white men in suits, don't work in that field; you asked to be raped when you wore that dress, never underestimate the primitiveness of an animal; be kind to those who aren't white, straight or male, be kind to the disadvantaged; eat with a fork and knife otherwise you won't appear as civilised.

I gave you water. Millions of minerals and life-giving materials. I gave life to the oceans. A universe within its own right. A universe, free of detriment, free of homicide, free of evil. I gave you land. Billions of acres of emerald grass and plants. Billions of acres of my history. Billions of acres of your everlasting sustenance. I gave you the atmosphere. The oxygen you breathe into your lungs. I gave you the infinite skies, the food-filled ground and everything in between; everything beyond what you can perceive. I gave you the coolness of the rain and the warmth of my star. I provided enough for each and every one of you. You didn't know how to share. You only knew greed. I only knew kindness. You only knew hatred. I only knew compassion.

I gave you my body and you took advantage of me. You filled my seas with your man-made toxins, right to the bottom of the Mariana Trench. You treated me as a swamp when you ran out of space for your eternal waste. You melted my crafted works of art amongst the Arctic. You murdered the beings I called my friends. You stripped me of my skin, my body and my mind. I gave you the world you live in and you thought you could divide it. Who gave you the right to give each land a name to call yourselves white, black or Asian? I gave you Pangea and Panthalassa. One united island and one united ocean. Split from the dancing of my tectonic plates. I gave you each other. You killed each other, with the weapons you created from the elements I gave you. I gave you your home. You gave me murder; you gave me war. I held the weight of your corruption. I wept as you wrecked me through the days and through the nights that I gave you. I watched on as you slowly erased the 4.5 billion years of my growth, of my memories. I only knew how to give. You only knew how to take.

TOM PORTHOUSE

*Count your blessings*

Andalye could have stayed in that exact position for years. The warmth of the three suns was blissful on her coat, the iridescent hue that reflected onto her hooves from the blades of baby blue grass made her feel as though she was one of the water-nymphs that fluttered around the lakes; the soft lilting breeze that flowed from the West was caressing her coat like a mother caresses her new-born foal. She felt as though this moment would never end, she wanted nothing more than to lay here in the meadow forever. Unfortunately, her mother shattered Andalye's reverie.

‘Andalye! Come here child!’

‘But Mum, I'm sunbathing!’ Andalye replied, unable to stop the subtle hint of irritation from sliding into her voice.

‘You will do no such thing, it's time for supper. Come and join us, you can sunbathe after you've eaten.’ Andalye sighed and, with what felt to her like almost God-like strength, lifted herself up onto her legs and trotted across the meadow towards the shadow of the willow tree where her blessing prepared for their supper. When she arrived she was greeted by several nuzzles from her siblings; they had a close relationship and, despite the occasional disagreement over their favoured grazing spots, the four of them had a far stronger bond than any other blessing of their kind they had ever come into contact with.

The four foals that made up the blessing – Andalye, her sister Perenella and their twin brothers Velaris and Achello – settled in a small circle around the ample array of food that their mother had gathered for them. Although they could survive perfectly well on the soft blue grass that carpeted their meadow, they were pertinent children and often wished for variety in their meals. Therefore, as she was often guilty of pandering her beloved offspring, Naayme would frequently spend hours in the dense forest gathering various edible things for supper. Andalye settled herself into her preferred spot next to Velaris and he brushed her neck with his muzzle affectionately.

‘Apologise to Mum, Andalye,’ he murmured kindly, ‘you know she's just nervous about you leaving soon.’

‘But she needs to calm down. It's not like I'll be gone forever anyway! Just until I have a foal to bear.’ Andalye replied irritably, she couldn't help but feel suffocated by her mother's protectiveness.

'I know she does Andy, but she just wants you to be okay,' Perenella piped up from Andalye's left side, having obviously been listening in. 'You know what she says about the males that roam around in the forest, fighting every other stallion they can see, she just wants you to go through your first Mating without getting frightened or irrevocably hurt.'

'I know, I know,' Andalye replied in a resigned tone, she knew Velaris and Perenella were right and that she would have to apologise. She trotted over to the opposite end of the willow-underside to where her mother sat with Achello, nuzzling his head with hers whilst he pretended not to enjoy it. Andalye did not say anything, simply leaning forwards and giving the top of her mother's head a loving lick. Naayme looked up from Achello's tail and gave her daughter a wide smile.

'Thank you Andalye; I do not mean to curtail you in any way, I know you are excited to go out and begin the Mate. All I want is for you to be safe; your fourth year is just one turn of the moons away, don't waste it my child. Enjoy it.' Naayme whispered all of this softly to Andalye.

With a small smile, Naayme stood to her full, impressive height. Andalye knew her mother was beautiful, but sometimes she was still shocked at the extent of her beauty; Naayme's coat was a shimmering white that gleamed in the very palest of lights, the soft hairs that made up her mane and tail rippled behind her like a silken cape every time she galloped, the tips of the hairs sparkled with the unique stardust of their kind which made her look like a breathing constellation in the dying light of Belaydron's three setting suns. The most impressive part of her however was her long, spiralling horn that burst from the centre of her forehead. The horn was of the purest silver in its main body, with thin lines of pastel blues, greens and pinks that spun playfully across its surface. Andalye could barely contain her excitement whenever she looked at her mother's horn; when she soon arrived at her fourth year her own horn would grow right through the small black star that currently adorned her forehead. She would then reach her full maturity and venture out from her family's meadow, to encounter a male and fulfil the Mating Rite.

Naayme turned to Andalye and, after looking at her other three foals who were all playing softly with each other as they began to tire visibly, told her that she was going to go back into the forest to gather some berries for their breakfast.

'I promised Achello and Perenella; they begged me to fetch them some berries from the trees near the edge of the forest. You can go back and lay in the meadow if you would like, Andalye, but please keep an eye on your brothers and sister. Do not wander off,' she finished sternly, before turning around and disappearing into the trees, resembling a gliding nebula in the

weak sunlight. Andalye returned to the place she had been lying in before they had supper, to soak up the last rays of the Belaydron suns, keeping one eye on her siblings whilst inwardly chastising her mother again. She had promised Andalye that she would stop trying to curtail her but had already made her promise to stay in the meadow and watch over Perenella, Velaris and Achello, who were all in the depths of sleep.

Whilst Andalye sat pondering this, a small flash of emerald green catapulted past her eyes. She lifted her head instantly, her mane whipping through the air as she scrambled up on her hooves to look for the source of the light. She could see the green orb hanging at the edge of the tree line that encompassed her sanctuary, squinting her eyes she could almost see the tiny body of the faerie she was certain swam in its centre. Andalye had always been desperate to see a faerie, her mother had told her all about them; the tiny holes in the trees they lived in and about how they granted wishes to baby unicorns who were well behaved.

This could be her only chance before her fourth birthday to experience any life outside of her blessing; if she caught the faerie she could wish for her freedom, the freedom to explore the tales of Belaydron that her mother had spun for her entire life. Making the decision to disobey in that moment was no more difficult than running through a spider's web, she cantered forward into the forest towards the emerald orb but as soon as she grew near it zoomed away deeper into the thicket of pale white branches. Andalye's pace quickened after the faerie but every time she sped forward the ball of light would float faster still until she lost sight of it. Walking towards where she had last seen it, she emerged into a clearing; the pale trees curved upwards allowing only a small circle of the night's sky to peep through the leaves, the pulsing purple stars beginning to shimmer as the sky grew darker. In the centre of the clearing lay a small but deep pool, the edges inset with brightly sparking stones of every colour imaginable; they were covered in strange markings, twisting into hundreds of interlinking shapes that ran around the entire circumference of the pool.

Andalye was transfixed, she had never seen anything more beautiful in her entire life and she moved slowly forwards until she saw the reflection of her own face in the still surface. Andalye jolted slightly when the shimmering object she had been following landed on the ground beside her; when the creature within was revealed Andalye's breath caught in her throat; what had travelled through the forest in the orb did not look like the faeries she had been told about. The creature had a long orange nose with small black eyes deeply inset into its thin and pointed head, the creature's lanky body was covered in orange fur and a thick tail curled slightly around the

short hind legs it was standing on, the animal's black-lipped mouth was curled into a wicked grin. Andalye had been told about a creature such as this before.

'I know what you are; you're a Kima Lisa. A trickster,' she accused the creature, her breath turning to ice and piercing her throat. Naayme had warned her of these creatures that lurked in the forest, luring innocent beings into their lairs before they tortured them.

'Well done, pony. That's exactly what I am,' the Kima Lisa replied slyly, 'and I've been watching you for a long while. I have come to know you well; I have come to know your greatest wish. I would like to grant it for you.'

'What greatest wish?' Andalye questioned, she knew it was a bad idea to converse with the creature, she would only give it more ammunition to use against her, but she could not help her curiosity.

'You wish to be free of your blessing; you wish to explore lands that are beyond anything you have ever known. I can grant this wish.' The Kima Lisa was inching slowly towards Andalye before waving one of its paws towards the surface of the pool. Andalye, against all the instincts that were screaming at her, felt her face move in tandem with the Kima Lisa's paw before she was once again staring at her reflection. She did not even have time to blink as she saw the orange paw move towards the back of her head, she felt the enormous strength push her forwards until the tips of her large nostrils just brushed the still surface of the water. The second her muzzle broke the surface the water began to move as though a monstrous creature was stirring in its depths. She tried to struggle but felt as though invisible arms had wrapped around her body and began to drag her off the ground and into the pool.

Flashes of multicoloured light emblazoned her.

White sparks grew from the corners of her eyes.

Blackness.

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Andalye awoke with a start. She ached all over, she was sure she had cut her head when she fell. Thinking about opening her eyes filled her with dread, had it all been a nightmare? All she wanted was to open her eyes to the blue grass and white trees of her meadow, with Belaydron's three suns beating down on her from the sky. Bracing herself, she opened her eyes, finding herself somewhere that at first glance resembled her own world, but not quite. Where she had



fallen was almost as soft as the meadow she had left behind, except this grass was a strange sickly green colour. She was laying beneath a tree, however this one was not a willow and instead of the pale white barks with the pink tinged leaves of her home, dark brown barks twisted sharply upwards, the narrow base flaking as it rose in branches covered with the green that sullied the floor.

She decided in that moment that the best thing she could do would be to get up and begin walking around. Surely if she walked for long enough, she would be able to find the pool that had brought her...wherever she was. Rising to her feet she turned around in a circle to achieve a better bearing of her surroundings. She was stood under one of the strangely coloured trees in what seemed to be a meadow of some sort; at the edge of this expanse of grass was a strange construction; thin slats of a similar material to the bark of the trees were arranged in square patterns joined together and this ran along the entire edge of the meadow on all sides. This seemed so strange to Andalye, she could not understand the purpose of such a thing, nor why it was so small. She had seen her mother jump four times the height of the wooden construction and it seemed impossible to her that anything could exist in this realm that would be incapable of either jumping over it or sliding through one of the large gaps the shiny bark had in its construction. She cantered toward it, gathering speed as she neared until she was almost at a gallop before pushing up from the ground and leaping over it, landing softly on the other side as if she had simply stepped over a large rock on the ground.

Now she had cleared the ridiculously ineffective barricade she trotted forward a small way until the ground dipped again, steeper this time. Looking carefully downward so as not to slip, Andalye was astounded at what she saw below her. She could see for what seemed like forever all around her, her eyes were drawn downwards as the ground began to descend for what looked like quite a far distance, finally becoming level and spreading outwards. There was no forest there however, what was there was so strange to Andalye that her mind could barely handle it. When she was a tiny foal Naayme had told her stories of the dwellings the faeries would magically carve themselves inside a tree they liked, this idea had always fascinated Andalye and Perenella who had never known anything other than the meadow and the open sky. If the idea of faerie dwellings in trees had fascinated her it was nothing compared to what lay below her. An entire warren of what looked to Andalye like strange rock formations twisted out of the ground, all made of different types of rock and stone that seemed to have been flattened to harsh corners and edges. Most of these constructions had what looked like square holes imbedded into them in symmetrical positions, some of these buildings had three such holes on top of each other. To Andalye these

were the biggest things she had ever seen, even the trees had not reached that high! In between these dwellings there seemed to run many different black rivers that linked the buildings to each other and ran between them. Andalye could not be sure at this height, but it seemed as though these rivers were stationary and small glinting contraptions were moving around on top of them.

She could not keep her curiosity inside her for much longer, the anticipation to view these fantastical things close up had reached an almost physical level so she began to carefully trot down the slope towards the collection of buildings. As she drew closer the first thing she noticed was the noise, these noises were nothing like the soft and musical sounds she was used to in Belaydron; instead of the babbling laughter of the brook as it flowed lazily across the rocks, her ears were now accosted by a low rumbling groan that seemed to emanate from the odd contraptions she had seen moving atop the river. She could faintly determine sounds as she began to move closer, though she could not discern their meanings in any way; it sounded like fast babbling in varying pitches, also something that sounded like the laughter she shared with her twin brothers Velaris and Achello. Inching closer and closer to the collection of dwellings she could now make out detail that she could not see on top of the hill; instead of black rivers, it seemed as though the dark and twisting rectangular shapes she had seen were hard black masses which were crisscrossed with a variety of brightly coloured lines, in mainly yellow and white. These lines seemed to mean something to the contraptions that were moving along them, it seemed that the coloured stripes determined their position on the dark substance.

It was all she wanted to do to see it for herself; she wanted to know what her hooves would feel like walking upon that black substance, she wanted to slam her tail on one of the shining moving boxes to see what would happen and she definitely wanted to walk up to one the strange creatures she could see milling about amidst the dwellings. They were so strange looking that her mind could barely comprehend it; soft, spongy skin of many different hues, from deepest ebony to pale, almost whitish pink, walking on two thin legs with two useless arms that mostly flopped around at their sides, they sported a huge variety of different kinds of manes atop their spherical heads. Perhaps strangest of all they were all clad in an immeasurable ensemble of varying different kinds of strange material that they had hung around their bodies in what seemed to be hundreds of combinations. Many of them were carrying very small, thin rectangles made of a similar substance to the moving boxes atop the black river, although in a variety of colours and sizes, some of them even held them to their heads and spoke into them. She could see that others were holding these rectangles in front of them and she noticed many colours, shapes and lights were twirling and moving around inside them, which the creatures could manipulate with their

fingers. It was the most bizarre display of magic that Andalye had ever witnessed in her entire life and despite her best instincts, she decided to move out from behind the small thickets of bushes where she had been observing and began to trot out into the open.

The black river felt like nothing she could have anticipated; the surface was hard to the touch but as she moved, she felt the substance give way slightly; so slightly that it was almost untraceable. She did not enjoy the sensation very much, her hooves felt quite slippery on this new surface, but her curiosity was higher than her desire for safety so she continued onto it gingerly, momentarily forgetting her surroundings until her reverie was shattered by a disgustingly loud shrieking noise. She almost jumped out of her coat and she turned around looking for the source of the noise, as she looked behind her she saw that she was standing right in the path of one of the moving boxes that, until this moment, she had been unaware actually carried the strange two-legged creatures inside them. The creature at the front of the box, looking through a strange material that seemed to be transparent, lifted his hand and pressed something inside the box, which then again ripped the air with the horrendously loud noise.

Andalye was frightened by this; she whinnied and moved off of the black river and under the shade of one of the stone constructions. As she did this, she found herself looking straight into the eyes of one of the two-legged creatures; this one was small and pale, it looked as though it might be a foal of some sort. She decided to be polite, as her mother always taught her to be.

She lent her muzzle forward and blew hard through her nostrils as was the polite custom in Belaydron. The foal giggled and a larger two-legged, possibly its parent moved closer to the foal and looked curiously at Andalye. She noticed many of the other creatures turning to stare at her, the other moving boxes slowed down until they were moving at a crawling pace; the noise of these new surroundings became far quieter. She felt certain that her presence here was unusual to these creatures.

She could not be sure of course, but she felt as though their gazes were not threatening, so she decided to move closer toward them. Hopefully they would somehow be able to communicate, they may possibly know the way to the nearest Kima Lisa's lair, and she would be able to get back to her blessing. As she moved closer, however, the two-legged's faces seemed to change from the curious but unthreatening countenance to something that resembled utter terror. Andalye could not understand why this was; she was being a good and polite foal to her elders, as Naayme had always taught her to be. Whilst she was pondering this, her vision began to swim; her neck bent forward and her brain felt as though it was being ripped open. Thick black tendrils of agony wrapped themselves around her skull and squeezed tighter and tighter until...it disappeared. The pain had gone; Andalye had no explanation as to what had happened or why it

had stopped so suddenly. Raising her head, she looked again at the two-legged's faces; there were more of them now crowding around her; all with the same strange look on their faces. She turned her head to see if there was a break in the crowd through which she could escape but as she looked around, she caught sight of her reflection in one of the transparent holes in the stone building she was stood next to. Where the black star that had until a moment ago adorned her forehead had been, there now jutted a long, spiralling, silver horn.

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### *One Year Later*

Andalye awoke with the warmth of the three Belaydron suns beating down on her coat. Lazily opening her eyes, she could see Velaris and Achello play-fighting near the shade of the willow tree, on the opposite side of the meadow Perenella was lapping water from the brook and lying beside her and fixing her with a glittering smile was her mother.

'Good morning, Mum,' Andalye murmured, 'I dreamt about the day my horn grew; I was so frightened that I was never going to see any of you ever again.'

'You are safe with us now Andy, you got back to us. That is all that matters now.' Her mother leant forwards to lay an affectionate lick on the top of Andalye's head, but as she did so it was not the soft feeling of her mother's love and the even softer sound of her tongue brushing her head that Andalye could sense. She felt the ground shaking and could hear loud clangs and the muffled sounds of shouting. She was dragged out of her fantasy and back into her stark reality. The beautiful surroundings of the meadow and the image of her blessing dissolved and were replaced by the image of cold, thick straps wrapping tightly around her limbs and the sight of hard metal on all sides. She was back in the suffocation of confinement, lifting her head upwards she could not see the large white sign that hung next to her new abode, but after hearing the scary two-legged shout the words out she had managed to decipher them:

Behold the discovery of our age! As seen on TV! Mythical creature is found! Come and see the unicorn! £300 entry, £500 for the deluxe meet and greet package!

Knowing she would hate what she saw when she looked around but knowing they would only bang louder if she did not look, she turned her gaze to the side of her metal barred box at the sea of faces that stared at her wide-eyed and open-mouthed. She did not want to look at them, she did not want to see them point their rectangles at her and flash their lights in her face. She did

not want to see their faces, knowing that they were either oblivious or uninterested in her pain and discomfort and that they would not help her find a Kima Lisa to go back to the meadow. She did not want to look at their predatory, astounded and awestruck faces. So, she curled inward upon herself, gazing at the floor, closing her eyes to the truth and cursing herself for not counting her blessings.

RACHEL REINHARD

*Me, myself, and i*

They had always been there, inside my head. Whispering, whimpering, whining as they fought each other. It started to drive my sanity over the edge, especially with each year that passed. By the age of twenty, my own mind was driving my body to its end. The voices always spoke; my mind was always exhausted, causing my body extreme fatigue.

*Me* is very needy, it always wants to be talked to or played with. It is like a little kid. Sometimes it is a smart-ass, but still always the most honest and kind one. Maybe it is my younger self, still hanging around (which makes me wonder if I was that needy as a child).

*Myself* is often the one to get me drunk. When I wind up somewhere I don't know or would never expect to be, this one was to blame. While *myself* is very outgoing, always wanting to go somewhere or do something, *me* prefers to stay inside and play video games.

Then there is *I*, who is obviously the leader of the three. It makes the ultimate decisions when there is arguing or when *me* and *myself* cannot decide on what to do. *I* is very wise and neutral, which makes it a good leader. It usually stays quiet when the other two argue, as if it is just watching and listening while gaining knowledge of the situation. At least, that is how my mind imagines what *I* is doing, for it cannot see or know for sure.

My tongue and mind both learned early on not use any of the pronouns that the voices go by for their names. Otherwise an argument would break out, and we would eventually get rewarded with a large headache. So, we resolved to use other pronouns that did not specify a single person: they, we, and us.

We used to hear the doctors say multiple times that they were simply voices—fake and made-up—living inside my head. The doctors offered medicine to help lessen the voices, maybe to cure it. And for once, that was when the three inside my head were silent. They did not say anything as the doctor began filling out a note. The silence was eerie, almost uncomfortable.

But the pain in my head told me a headache was approaching, so the doctor's note was gratefully received before we could think too much more about the voices being silent. No one ever believed us – only laughed – when we claimed that voices were inside our head. They called us crazy, which we used to believe. Why would we want to think ourselves crazy? We are not crazy or insane. We just ... have a hard time getting along sometimes that's all. At least, that is what I'm told by—

Hi, *me* here! I was tired of our host talking so I wanted to take a turn! They're always just talking to themselves, though we guess we cannot really blame them for that... We love to play video games – no matter the type or genre – and junk food! Even though we know they are unhealthy for us, we still love it! We also like—

*Myself* here. Interrupting *me* because they will just keep talking for the next hour. Trust me, we have just saved you from that. Now, you cannot always believe what the other voices say – even the host. Anyone can lie, even the voices inside someone's heads. I want a beer now; anyone want a beer?

Beer is disgusting! I'd rather have candy! And play video games! And—

Shut up, *me*! We both know that *myself* has better taste than you!

*I* better step in at this point. Greetings, we are *I*! Oh, you already know who we are? Ah, that is right! The host already introduced us, did they not? Although, *myself* is right: you should not trust anything that any of us say. Except for what we say, you can trust us. We are the wise and neutral one, yes? So trust us. Obey us. So when we say buy a gun, you do it. When we say shoot some people through the heart, you do it.

And when we say put the metal to your head and pull the trigger – you better do that too. If you don't there will be consequences. Remember that medicine doesn't always get rid of the voices. Because we are apart of you. Because we *are* you. And there is no way to get rid of us.

HOLLY ROFF

*Of the earth*

The empty lobby echoed with my footsteps as I made my way across the wooden floor. The automatic doors stood tightly shut as I headed towards them. I wasn't sure why I bothered, but I pressed the button and wasn't surprised when nothing happened. Sighing and bracing myself, slipping the mask down over my face, I pushed open the door and stepped outside.

The sharp air bit into my cheeks as soon as my boots touched the dirty pavement. However, despite the strong wind the day itself was warm and almost immediately I began to sweat inside my thick coat.

Glancing around the deserted street, I noticed that the bags of rubbish outside were beginning to break open and spill out onto the road. Rats scurried over them and moved inside the black plastic, making the bags look as if they were breathing.

No one had been to collect the rubbish in almost a week, and I was beginning to think that no one would.

Trying to push the agitation down, I wrapped my coat tight around my middle and tried my best to ignore the pressing heat as I began my walk to work.

I passed the underground station on the street corner and crossed over. Normally, I would have taken the train, but when my alarm had woken me up that morning, I hadn't been able to hear the whir of the trains as they passed outside my window. I had spent most of the morning watching the tracks while I went through my morning routine but still hadn't seen a single sign of one. Even now, as I passed, the underground seemed silent and dead.

It didn't really matter, I had done the walk multiple times over the past three years and it didn't take much more than thirty minutes. However, walking alone in the early or late hours had started to feel a lot less safe than it used to.

Distracted, I peered up through the thick clouds in search of the sun, but the sky was as dark as if it was about to rain. It hadn't so much as drizzled in weeks and it still seemed as though there was no rain coming, as the heat from the sun still seemed to manage to filter through the dark.

As I passed the entrance to the park, a fox darted across the road in front of me and into the undergrowth. It was a common occurrence as the park was one of the only green spaces nearby. However, I couldn't get the sight of the fox out of my mind, as it had had a bone clutched in its



mouth, and the bone had been nearly as wide as the fox was long. The creature was so skinny that it had slipped through the fence surrounding the park with no trouble.

I clenched my coat even tighter around me as I walked, and felt my fingers digging into the bones in my own ribs. Perhaps I looked just as skinny as the fox, as I hadn't been able to eat much recently either.

Up ahead, at the next crossing, I had to take a sudden leap back as I went to cross the road at the red light and two cars flew by without stopping – no police car followed them. Taking a deep breath and double-checking the street again, I crossed as quickly as I could manage without falling.

The school on the opposite side of the road – which was usually alive with the sound of children – stood empty and silent and no one moved within. It was a sad sight and I hurried along quickly.

As I walked further into the city, I noticed that the streets were virtually devoid of all people, except from those few who were also on their way somewhere.

Up ahead, the sound and sight of a large crowd could be seen in the distance, near the city hall.

They were holding signs and appeared to be protesting like they had the previous week, so I decided to ignore them and hurry on towards work away from the large crowd, in case it turned hostile, as I had seen happen before.

As I passed, I saw a mother with her children also passing by on the other side of the street. She ushered them along quickly, glancing around suspiciously at the shouting people and also at me. They fled into a smaller street and quickly disappeared.

Once I had managed to get away from the crowd, I found myself on an even more secluded street, where it looked as though most of the shops had recently been broken into. They remained open without being boarded up and I saw stray cats and dogs huddling inside, hiding from the cold wind and trying to find whatever scraps they could on the floor.

I felt even less safe than I had by the large crowd and almost ran to the other end of the street to a more populated and open area.

Further down that street, there appeared to be a fight going on between several people over food from one of the supermarkets and I quickly realised that I felt safe nowhere in the city anymore.

My stomach grumbled at the sight of the food being fought over, but I crossed the street anyway and hurried on, past some police officers who were watching the fight carefully, but doing nothing to prevent it.

I could see my building in the distance now rising above the others close to it.

I headed towards it, as if it was a beacon to show me the way and raced past people bartering at shop doors for food.

The closer I got to the building, the more signs of normal civilisation I saw, with many others heading to work in the buildings close by.

One of the buildings seemed to be smoking from the inside but again no one seemed to be doing anything to prevent it burning down.

I used my key card on the building, grateful when it beeped green and the automatic door swung open immediately. The relief that they were working flooded through me and I found myself smiling as I lowered the mask and walked across the marble lobby. The desk was empty but I wasn't surprised.

Despite the success with the doors, the lifts weren't working, so I took a slow procession up the stairs to the tenth floor, where I found my office exactly as I had left it on the previous Friday.

I saw no signs of any of my co-workers as I made my way in and settled down, but I wasn't surprised to find the building deserted.

Once I had set up all my things, I swung around in my chair to face the big open window that looked out onto the city.

The world looked different. It had been a month since the news had broken that we had passed the turning point and there was now no fixing what we had done.

Most of the important and rich people in the world had left the same week, gone off to a new planet they could ruin.

We, the poor and the unimportant, were left behind to struggle along in the mess that had been made.

There was no way of knowing if it would ever get better now, but we had to try.

Does she hate me? Jerry found that he was asking himself this question more frequently since he started working at 'FOODSPARK'. Given that the girl in question was Felicity and given how much she non-verbally assaulted him, he already knew the answer to his question. But why? What reason could he have possibly given her to feel so insensitive towards him? He had tried to be nice to her ever since they became co-workers, but she seemed to not want anything to do with him.

It was probably the first time they had met – well, technically, the first time they had seen each other. It was on the bus taking them from campus to the main site of study. He had early classes and had to catch the first bus. He was early and was the only one on the bus. Soon, lots of people also started to get on the bus. The atmosphere was quite chilly, and he felt cold.

All of a sudden, the bus came to a stop, jerking everyone forward. Jerry, partially asleep, hit his head on the chair in front of him and cursed under his breath. What caused it? There she was, running towards the bus in the weirdest of ways, shouting and waving so as to be noticed by the bus driver. He hit his head for this? She was far off and he couldn't see her clearly. But what he had seen and what this eccentric person had caused, made him dislike her before he even saw her clearly.

After what seemed like forever, even though she was running, she finally made it to the bus. She slipped the bus driver a faintly audible 'thank you' and started to make her way down the bus. It wasn't Jerry's business normally, but if he was going to harbour feelings of dislike towards this individual, perhaps seeing her face wasn't the worst thing to do. He lazily lifted his sunken head to look at her. She had her head down, but her clothing caught his attention. She wore a white shirt underneath a big black blazer, and short shorts over tights. *Not bad, although a tad revealing*, Jerry thought to himself. He looked up to see her face, and just before she sat, she caught him looking at her. He had been staring the whole time, and she had noticed and found offence in it. He couldn't move his face or his eyes away from her. Not because she had caught him staring at her lower body and probably thought he was a pervert, but because he was looking at possibly the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. He was love-struck, but how? One minute he was hating her and considering the way she acted 'weird', but now, he was unreasonably attracted to her, and her neurotic way of drinking coffee and adjusting on her seat was 'cute', so cute he couldn't take his eyes off her.

It was all in the face. It wasn't perfect, she had a few blemishes. And he couldn't say exactly why seeing her filled him with so much desire. He felt an impulse to walk over and start a conversation with her, but he quickly drove the impulse away. He'd had bad experiences with girls; the stuttering when his high school friends pushed him to talk to his crush, the awkward kiss with Deborah. Besides, this relationship was doomed from the start. The minute she caught him staring at her good-looking body.

He hoped he wouldn't run into her. He knew he might not be able to control himself if he saw her again, especially if she was dressed attractively. But they lived on the same campus, and they did run into each other again. He had his timidity to thank for not embarrassing himself, and a bunch of her friends who were with her the third time he saw her. Luckily, seeing her only a few times a week made him realize how impossible being with her would be and also made his desire for her become effectively lower. It didn't stop him from imagining though – imagining his life with her and how much better it would be, imagining them getting married and having kids – two girls that looked exactly like her, beautiful and elegant.

A month passed and he didn't see her again. It made him worry, but he took it as a sign of disapproval from a divine being. He tried so hard not to think of her. He had better things to think about; he had to work to support his struggling father who was trying so hard to pay his tuition, and so he could treat his brother like a king. He also had schoolwork. They had just been given a project, as well as numerous assignments. But all that didn't bother him as much as his need to get a job. The rent wasn't going to pay itself. His last job was hell to say the least.

He tried hard and applied for a number of jobs, but he got denied for every one of them. He was starting to get tired when a breakthrough came. He had been accepted and asked to come in for an interview at 'FOODSPARK', one of the largest retail chains in the country. He was happy because the pay was very reasonable, and it was within walking distance from his house. If he got the job, it would be perfect. But why had they accepted him now? He had applied for the same job multiple times and got denied. Was it because of his persistence? He guessed he was never going to know and asking would have been the most absurd thing he would have ever done.

He had walked in, a little nervous, to his interview. He had prepared what he was going to say. He figured that saying exactly what the employer wanted to hear was going to be best for him. The interview went great and he got the job, effective immediately. It all seemed too perfect. He called his parents to inform them and they congratulated him. It was no big deal, so he didn't tell most of his friends, only the ones that asked.

Walking into the supermarket the next day to begin work was more like walking into an exam room. He was nervous and even the manager could sense it. The manager was really nice and that alleviated his fears a little. He had barely worked an hour when Felicity walked in. He thought she was dressed as beautifully as she could, even though she was only in jeans and a sweatshirt. Jerry froze. How was he supposed to serve her? He hoped she wasn't going to decide to use his till. Surprisingly, she wasn't picking anything from the shelves, she wasn't even looking at the shelves. She didn't look like she was in there to buy goods. She was walking to the back of the store – the dressing room. What was happening? He couldn't focus on the customer in front of him. Did she know an employee in the store? Even if she did, how did she get access to the dressing room?

His questions were answered, to his disbelief, when she walked out of the back room with an employee shirt on. She was an employee of the very same store. What were the chances?

'Excuse me, sir,' said the short impatient woman he was attending to.

'Oh... I'm sorry!' Jerry said, after pulling himself together.

Luckily for him, she hadn't seen him yet, so he still had the chance to bolt out of there to avoid embarrassment. But what kind of man would he be if he ran away from his perfect job because of a girl who might not even care about his existence? A fool – that's what kind of man. He decided to be brave and wave. He flapped his hands in the most awkward of ways. *Guess who was being weird now?* He hoped that she didn't see the fiasco he was creating. She didn't. Instead, she proceeded to greet one of the many other employees on duty. They seemed pretty close and hugged for a long time. Great! Not only did he have to bear the agony of seeing the love of his life every day and not talking to her, but he also had to watch her interacting with other people, and possibly her boyfriend. It should have been him that she hugged, not some other guy.

Displeased, but not broken, he decided to go and say hi to her. He waited until her shift was over to talk to her. He was the guy and he had to make the first move. It was the norm. He advised himself against it over and over again. *You're going to cry*, a voice inside him said.

'Felicity!' he called out.

He didn't know what he expected – maybe a royal acceptance or a hug like the other employee got, but it was neither. She looked at him like she had never laid eyes on him before. It hurt, but the least he could do was introduce himself.

He waited for her to say something, anything. 'Hey' or 'How are you?' or even something as insulting as 'Who are you?' would have been welcome. They both stood just outside the store, quite awkwardly. He hoped a mammoth could come and run him over or anything to happen in

order to save him from this debacle. Anything would be better than this – he would honestly rather have run naked in a crowd than stand in front of Felicity.

It was all in the face, he reminded himself. Her face was in sync with the sun. She had plum cheeks and a little dent just at the side of her lip. Her auburn hair seemed perfect and her eyes... Those eyes, he was lost in them.

‘Excuse me?’ she said. Her voice was inexplicably more attractive than her body. What was she doing to him? He seemed to love everything about her, even the enormous red boots she was wearing.

He shuddered. She had jerked him back to reality and he realized that he’d been staring all the while. *You have to complete what you started, no running away*, said the voice that had previously told him that he was going to cry.

‘I... I just wanted to introduce myself.’ Of all things he could have said, that was what he went for? If all men were like him, there would be no children. He hoped that Felicity would acknowledge and perhaps appreciate his intentions.

‘Do I know you?’ she asked with what seemed like the sincerest of manners. She genuinely did not know who he was. How was he supposed to say they met? Could he have told her that she had caught him checking out her body? He decided to take the easy but embarrassing way out.

‘I’m sorry... I thought you were someone I knew. It’s my mistake. My bad.’ he said and made to leave. It was just another sign that they were not meant to be. He expected her to walk away, but she just stood there with a weird look. She had the same look of a teacher who had just caught a student cheating in an exam. That dreadful culmination of mischievous cunning and pleasure.

‘And she happens to also be named Felicity?’ she said and crossed her arms.

Fuck him for being so damned stupid. He’d completely forgotten that he’d called her by name. How was he supposed to tell her that he knew her name? By eavesdropping on her and her friends talking? Pathetic! He would have loved to think about the thousands of ways their encounter could have played out, but at that moment his brain had deserted him. He froze.

As if she had known of his cowardice and timidity prior to their encounter, she left almost immediately. He had gotten himself out of the situation, but at what cost? He had probably lost his chance with her. He could feel his heart bleeding. *Was it supposed to hurt that much?* He wanted to explain to her that he wanted her to mean so much to him, that he didn’t even know that he was capable of wanting someone that much. He wanted to tell her how desirously he looked at her while they worked even though it was the very first day they had

worked together – or was it deliriously? He couldn't tell the difference. He wanted her so much, it drove him crazy.

He couldn't sleep that night – understandably. He wanted to stop thinking about her; about her glorious smile and her contagious laughter. He wanted to close his eyes and not see her. In a way, he cursed the day he met her. He reproached the moment he decided to look at her. *Time heals all wounds*, he told himself. *You've only known her for one week! You stupidly hopeless romantic!* the bad-news-bringing voice in his head told him. It was true, but it didn't make the pain go away. If anything, it made it worse. He contemplated leaving the store, but again, he'd be a fool of a man to leave a job that perfect just because of a girl. He couldn't believe how much of an impact she had on him, even without saying more than two sentences to him.

The next day came and with it came a very daunting decision. He decided to suck it up and face her – well, not technically. He was going to face her from a distance and try his best to avoid her. It worked, for a while. She didn't seem to care. This went on for about a week. She didn't seem to care, and he pretended not to also. But he knew how much he was hurting. *Time heals all wounds*, he kept saying to himself. He maybe could have avoided meeting her, but he couldn't stop his eyes from looking for her. She was so graceful. She was a senior store assistant and supervised the stocking of products. She was his boss and was supposed to be directly supervising the processes he was required to do, but she transferred it to Simon – the guy she was hugging so passionately the other day. Jerry hated his guts and Simon seemed to hate him too. They rarely ever spoke, but it wasn't any of his business. It wasn't his fault. None of it was his fault.

It went on for weeks and Jerry honestly started to think he was getting used to it. But no. His being employed by the same store that Felicity worked in was a set-up. Life had set it up, and life was determined to fuck him up in any way it could.

At the beginning of his fifth week, some products had run out on the shelves and he had to restock them. Unfortunately for him, Simon was not around so he had to be supervised by Felicity. Then things got worse for him. To show how much she disliked him, and possibly also didn't know his name – or care to know it – she snapped her fingers twice and yelled 'Assistant!' all the way from the back of the store. Jerry pretended that he wasn't the one being referred to in that manner. Only animals were called that way. It would be inhumane for her to belittle him like that. She did it again and he answered. He had no choice. If there was ever an answer to the question of Felicity hating him, it would be 'definitely'. But why she hated him? He had no idea. It wasn't his fault. None of it was. Him being a coward and not being able to talk to her couldn't be the reason for all the enmity.

This manner of harassment continued, along with Felicity giving out deathly looks every time their eyes met. One minute she was a beautiful angel to the customers and the next, she was the grim reaper to him. Or grin reaper, since she wiped the grin off his face. Jerry convinced himself that it was the worst she could do, so he lived with it. He had to stay, because of the pay. Or maybe he had another reason of staying. Maybe no matter how much she hated him, he still loved her and wanted to see her gorgeous face every day. It couldn't be. No human being would want to be with someone who treats them like an animal. It continued for weeks until the manager called him in one day.

'Am I getting fired?' he asked before the manager could say anything.

The manager laughed. He wasn't like most managers. He wasn't officious or authoritative. He could even be described as nice. So why was he seated in his cramped little office?

'No, you're not. An employee has recommended that I should fire you. On the basis that you don't have a good rapport with the other employees,' the manager said, and sipped his coffee.

*Damn that grin reaper. Now she wants to get me fired? Hell no.* He was going to give her a piece of his mind. He didn't care anymore.

'That's not true. I talk with Maria, Jake, Sophia and Anna.'

'I know, but for the sake of anonymity, I can't tell you who told me. But I would recommend you to be friendly with all the employees.'

*Fuck anonymity.* It was that grin reaper and he knew it. He didn't even care if he got fired anymore. He'd had enough of this mistreatment and he wasn't going to stand for it anymore.

He excused himself and set out to find Felicity. She wasn't in the store, so he figured she would be in the dressing room. She was in there, with Simon. How was he going to get that interfering idiot out of the room? Luckily for him, Simon left as soon as he entered the room.

'I need to speak with you,' he said to Felicity. She was seated and looked at him with mild confusion, as if wondering where he got the courage to complete a full sentence in front of her.

She was so beautiful, even in his outrage he recognized that. How he felt like sinking his lips into hers. He could spend eternity just gazing at her face. No. No. No. He was angry and he had to let her know just how angry he was.

'What for?'

'Listen, I don't know what I did or what you think I did for you to hate me as much as you do,' he said, hoping to get some results.



She sat there with the straightest of faces. What sort of human was this girl? He was infuriated.

‘Reporting me to the manager for lack of rapport with you was low. Very low, even for someone like you. And let me just say, I’d rather have a rapport with an alien or a fucking chicken than say another word to you.’ He hoped his words would pierce her cold, hard heart.

Still, she sat. Her face still straight. He was getting nowhere with this girl. It would be better to just give up. He made to go out of the dressing room.

‘It wasn’t me,’ Felicity said in a low voice.

He turned back. She had her head in her hands. What was happening? A minute ago, she seemed not to care and now she cared? Had his words gotten to her? More importantly, who could it have been if it wasn’t her? *Simon* crept into his mind. How could he have been so stupid?

‘It was Simon, wasn’t it?’ he asked.

‘God, you’re such an idiot!’ Her head was still lowered, and her voice cracked. Was she crying? It was his turn not to care. But how did his shouting affect her that much? She really was weird. He could feel himself starting to pull away from his desire. He started to regain his hold on his emotions.

‘I’ve had enough of you treating me like shit, okay!’ He had only made a mistake, which was an understandable mistake. She had basically treated him like a lower species since they had started working together.

‘I’m sorry.’ She said soberly. Did she just apologize? Was his anger making him hallucinate? ‘I didn’t mean to be so rude,’ she continued.

She looked up at him, still sitting, and Jerry wished she hadn’t. *How can someone be so manipulative with her looks?* She had a look of innocence and sincerity, like a dog just wanting some love.

‘So now you apologize?’

‘I said I’m sorry. Don’t make me regret it.’

‘Doesn’t change the fact that you have mistreated me for weeks, and I want to know why. Why you hate me and why your annoying ‘boyfriend’ reported me to the manager!’ He formed air quotes around the word boyfriend to show his disapproval of their ‘relationship’.

‘He’s not my boyfriend. And I already explained myself; I didn’t mean to be rude. I brought you here so—’ She stopped, too late. The cat – a very big cat – was already out of the bag. Jerry was just confused. What did she mean by brought him here?

‘Please explain.’ He didn’t need to say more than that.

She took a deep breath.

'Listen, I knew you liked me from the first day on the bus, when I caught you checking me out... And I liked you too. But I knew you were a wimp and I decided to help you, well technically me, or us.'

'Don't tell me that you messed with my job application!' He was getting angry.

'Just a little bit. I recommended you to Mr. Ben. It was stupid, I know. You don't have to raise your voice at me. I feel bad enough already. I know what you are thinking; what kind of girl would do all this?' She buried her face in her hands.

Jerry was aghast, dumbfounded. What was happening? There sat the girl he had been madly in love with, trying all he could to be with her, but instead got a living hell for a workplace. And she had the nerve to tell him that she was also in love with him all this while, while treating him as harshly as she could. Oh, he knew what kind of girl she was. As much as he tried to convince himself that she was crazy, he knew that she was crazy in love. And it made him feel good. Besides, don't we all do crazy things when we're in love?

In the absurdity and weirdness of it all, he sat next to her and slowly placed his hands on her upper back. She looked at him. It was that face, those eyes, those lips, it was all of that he loved and now, he was starting to love her for her attitude (he was going to have a lot of time to deal with that). All of the desire he had tried to suppress opened like a floodgate. He was overwhelmed with emotion and he kissed her. He waited for her to pull away and slap him, but it didn't happen. It was magical and electric. And he honestly wished he could stay in that moment forever.

He couldn't believe it. But there was something still bothering him.

'So, what is Simon to you?'

'Come on! He's my friend and he has a girlfriend. Does that make you feel better?' She said and punched him lovingly. It still hurt.

'Oh, that's good.' He couldn't wait to see the look on Simon's face when he heard that they were romantically involved.

He still couldn't believe it. Thirty minutes ago, he feared for his life. He thought he was going to be fired.

Somehow, he got his girl. Or rather, they got each other.

And that's how life works sometimes. You're in a position of misery one minute and sometimes, things work out the next minute... Only to be fucked up again.

'Jerry!' He heard the manager bellow from inside of the store.

'Uh-oh.' He had left the till unattended. He might lose his job, for real this time.

LAURA-JANE WILLS

*Operation hurricane*

*Jenny*

According to his notes, Parker Johnson was perfectly normal. It was everyone else that had a problem, everyone else who was insane. It wasn't their fault if they couldn't see the bigger picture, if they couldn't see that what he was doing was for their own good. He was ridding the world of people who would destroy it with every chance they got, and that was a good thing. That was the right thing, and he shouldn't be locked up for it. He should be worshipped; parades should be thrown for him, or at the very least, he should've got a letter from the Queen by now.

Jenny Crawford knew that none of what had happened was strictly Parker's fault. He was mentally ill, hence the NGRI plea issued by his lawyer at court. She knew that something in his head was telling him that the people he had chosen were pure evil, as he'd told her on many occasions. She'd seen the whole vigilante complex in many of her patients, but she couldn't help but feel that there was something different about the teenage boy she'd been treating for only a few weeks. It was almost like there was some truth in his words. She found herself wanting to believe him during more than one of their meetings. She found herself wanting to believe him today.

'You know, if I hadn't been there, he would have killed that girl,' Parker sat with his arms crossed, leaning back on his chair in that casual manner of his. Jenny had seen it in many of her patients, narcissism a dominant trait in many of the murderers that passed through her door. Parker was a murderer, she often had to remind herself; he'd killed innocent people and that was a horrendous crime, even if it was through no fault of his own.

'Which girl, Parker?'

'That one with the yellow raincoat. I think she had a red skirt on too.'

CCTV from the night of the murder had shown a girl matching that description passing through the crime scene moments before Parker's victim had arrived. From his file, Jenny knew that the girl had provided the witness statement that had eventually put Parker behind bars, claiming that she'd seen a teenage boy with blonde hair and what she was sure were green eyes, jump down from a rooftop, running up to her and telling her to run. The girl with the yellow raincoat had then proceeded to tell the police how she had been scared for her life, running as far as she could before hiding in an alleyway. It was then that she had caught a glimpse of the same

teenage boy tackle a man with a shaved head, punching him in the face several times before eventually stabbing him in the gut.

The modus operandi had matched those of about five murders that had taken place over the course of several weeks, witness statements lining up with camera footage to incriminate who the rest of the world thought was just a kid on his gap year. Jenny had been on her way to the office when she'd seen the news, the television screen displaying a video of Parker in handcuffs, a solemn look on his face as he was marched out of his house. She'd never be able to get the sound of his stepmother's harrowing scream as she fought against the police who were taking the closest thing she had to a real son away from her out of her head, hearing it every time she showed up for visitation. Mrs Johnson was a glamorous woman, indulging in the luxuries that the money from her late husband, Parker's father, provided, but she loved the young boy all the same, coming to see him every month, pleading with him to tell her why he'd done what he'd done. Parker's answer was the same every time.

*You wouldn't believe me if I told you.*

'Parker, the girl you're talking about didn't even know Charlie Davis. She'd never seen him until that night. Why would he possibly want to hurt her?'

Jenny had asked this question about all of Parker's victims, and each time, she noticed the same response from him. He'd bite his lip, his eyes darting to the floor; a long period of silence, which she figured meant that he was battling with himself. She had decided early on that there was something he wanted to tell her, something important. However, it was clearly something he felt he couldn't share, a secret that he was holding onto for dear life.

'Parker, you can tell me. I'm here to help you, remember?'

There was iciness in Parker's eyes as he looked up at her. Jenny felt cold to the bone as she regained her professionalism, reminding herself that this wasn't a teenager who had got a bit too drunk at a party and decided to go skinny-dipping in the neighbour's pool. She was sitting across from a serial killer, which was nothing new in reality. The only thing that was different was that he was practically a kid, and perhaps that was the scariest thing about him. If someone like Parker Johnson could commit the cold-blooded crimes that he had, then what did that say about the rest of humanity? What did that say about the other kids out there, about the adults who raised them?

'I think we're done here for today, Dr. Crawford.'

'Very well. Miles, if you would,' Miles may as well have been Parker's bodyguard, having been granted the task of escorting the boy to and from his room. Whilst in custody, Parker had managed to break out of his cell, and it was an hour before a squad car had found him wandering the streets of London, a swagger in his step, a smile on his face. If he could escape from the Met,

there was no saying just what he was capable of unattended. The only place he was alone was in his room, locked in by an iron door, strapped to his bed by his wrists and his ankles. The police had come to the conclusion very early on that he was dangerous and couldn't be trusted. Who could blame them, really?

'We'll pick this up tomorrow then, Parker?'

He didn't say anything as he left the room, Miles' hand on his back. Jenny breathed a sigh of relief when the door closed, reaching for the cup of tea that she made just before the session, and that morning's newspaper. Her eyes widened as she read the headline, thoughts of Parker's supposed secret running through her mind.

*Witness To Brutal Murder Found Dead In Her Home.*

Jenny's eyes scanned the article, reading about Molly Moses and the state in which she had been found. She had been wearing a red skirt at the time, blood stains barely visible on the material, her yellow raincoat splattered when her throat had been cut. Neighbours had stated that Molly thought she was being watched days before her death, paranoia causing her to cut herself off from everyone when she could. Her boyfriend, Jake Dempsey, had told the police that she kept talking about the night of Charlie Davis' murder, about how everything was connected, about how it would come back to haunt her in the end. She'd even gone as far to say that Parker Johnson had saved her life.

It was at that moment Jenny realised her tea was cold. She abandoned the newspaper, poured the contents of the cup into the sink and put the kettle on. It was time she saw her next patient.

### *Parker*

As Parker made his way back to his room, he felt a cold breeze blow through him. He shivered, earning a strange look from Miles. There weren't any windows open, after all, and the central heating in Falcon Place was unbelievably good considering the tight budget the board was on. Parker felt deflated, the breeze acting as the confirmation he had needed. From the moment he'd been arrested he'd been dreading the news that his actions hadn't helped anyone this time. Charlie Davis' murder may have given Molly a few days, but it was no surprise that Vultures had sent someone else after her. If only he had been more careful, he might have been able to save her again.

He wondered who had done the deed. There was Quill, also known as Quentin Lopez, a man with a penchant for poison darts that turned his victims' veins black before their hearts eventually gave out, Lioness, aka Skye Fletcher, a young girl Parker had gone to school with known to be destructive in everything she did, or maybe it had been the Vulture himself, the big

shot at the top of the leader board, tired of getting his minions to do his dirty work, knowing that they would fail as long as Wings existed.

Parker often thought about how Wings was faring without him. His father had founded the organisation, leaving his son in charge when the Vulture had killed him. It was all going so well until he had been caught, until he'd made the schoolboy error of forgetting to disable the CCTV. And now he was stuck here, unable to find a way out, and Molly was dead.

If Benjamin Johnson was still here, Parker knew that he would have told his son to grow up and to be the leader he was born to be. He would have told him to take control of his abilities, to not let the sacrifice his grandfather had made be in vain. But there was something about this place, about the iron walls and the dodgy medication that made it all that much harder. Since the moment he had stepped foot into his new room, Parker had felt his abilities weaken, had felt them slide further and further out of his grasp. It was a miracle he could still tell when the people he had saved were safe no longer. Thank God the science hadn't been affected that far just yet.

Walking down the corridors, Parker tried to picture familiar faces. He thought of Evie and Clyde, of Harry and Jessie, all of them working together to try and get their leader out of the hellhole he was in. He even thought of Will with his sour expressions and his constant negativity, Parker's least favourite member of Wings. Whoever thought it was good idea to give that idiot his grandfather's formula clearly wasn't thinking straight. A small smile appeared on Parker's face as he remembered all the insults they had thrown at each other, surprising himself when he realised that he missed winding up his fellow vigilante.

'Come on, Johnson, you know the drill,' Miles' voice was enough to snap him out of thoughts of home, and he proceeded to lie down on what he had been told passed as a bed. He stared up at the ceiling, pretending not to care as the cuffs were tightened around his wrists and his ankles, muttering a rather pathetic farewell to his bodyguard. Better for them to think he was a psychopath than knowing the truth. His mother had died keeping that secret, and he wasn't about to let that be for nothing.

Parker's abilities hadn't let him sleep in three days, his body acting as an alarm every time he dared to close his eyes, telling him that Molly was still in danger and that he needed to save her. He was in no position to complain about it, having chosen to have knowledge of the people he saved when he made his fifth injection. This one had been the hardest, and Jessie had had to look away as her friend positioned the needle where his neck met his jaw.

'Are you sure about this, boss?'

‘Positive. I need to know that we’re doing our jobs properly. We can’t just keep saving people for them to die anyway.’

Not only had it been the most painful of injections, it had also taken the longest to kick in. Parker remembered how quick his first ability had taken hold, his father having been the one to give it to him.

‘The ability to see any escape route? Are you sure? There’s no going back once I do this.’

‘I’m sure, Dad,’ Benjamin ruffled his son’s hair, secretly wishing that he would never grow any older than sixteen.

‘That’s my boy.’

Parker had never felt as proud as he did when the formula flooded his veins, moving through his wrists before a slight jolt in his chest gave him a whole new sense of vision. Only now, it wasn’t quite working like it had at the police station. That was the thing about science; there were always reactions that didn’t act in your favour. If only he could figure out what was in the walls of Falcon Place that was causing it and maybe he could disable it. The chains keeping him down didn’t exactly help either.

Parker had never had someone he’d saved die before, and it haunted him through the night. He’d always been there, always managed to kill the bad guy and save the girl. He felt empty knowing that Molly was now lying in a morgue somewhere, Clyde’s premonitions swimming through his mind. She was supposed to get married to Jack, and they were supposed to have two kids. They were supposed to grow old together, and they were supposed to have at least four grandchildren. She was supposed to leave her old life behind her, and no one was ever supposed to know that she had given the Vulture’s true identity to Cyclone. To his Dad.

Benjamin Johnson had carried the Vulture’s true identity to his grave which made Parker’s job all that much more difficult.

‘I’m sorry, Molly. I’m sorry I couldn’t save you. I’m sorry I scared you that night in the alley, but you would have died sooner if I hadn’t stopped Chills. You weren’t supposed to die anyway. It’s all my fault. I’m so stupid. I don’t deserve to be a superhero, just like you don’t deserve to be dead. If my Dad were here, he’d kill me. Why he ever put in me in charge of Wings, I guess I’ll never know.’ If anyone was listening right now, they would have thought he was crazy, well, crazier. Miles was outside, and Parker had no doubt that in tomorrow’s interview with Dr. Crawford, the talking to himself would most definitely be mentioned. Another note in his file, another note to break his stepmother’s heart. Kate Johnson had no idea about her stepson’s secret life, about her late husband’s goal to rid the world of a villainous organisation intent on ruining humanity. She would have thought he was delusional, just like the good old doctor did.

Parker had been intrigued by Jenny Crawford the moment he had been introduced to her. She thought she was helping people get better, helping them to see clearly, when really she was naive to the real going-ons in the world, and was probably making it all that much worse every time she prescribed a new pill. He wasn't the only vigilante locked up. Only yesterday on his way to a breakfast that he spent in isolation, Parker caught a glimpse of one of his father's former friends.

Crow had been caught when Parker was eleven, his fingerprints having been found on a broken whisky glass, the other half lodged in Toxic's throat. It had scared him to see the once glorified superhero, a member of Wings' Hall of Fame, reduced to a vacant, lifeless being, medication issued by Dr. Crawford having made him just Jim Harrison, the killer old man whose only complaint was that he could never find his glasses. Half of the time, they were on top of his head.

Parker Johnson didn't want to end up like Jim. He wanted to end up like Crow in the Hall of Fame, his alias on a gold plaque next to his father's.

*Hurricane [Parker Johnson], son of Wings' founder, Cyclone [Benjamin Johnson], grandson of Harold Johnson, inventor of the Superhero Serum. A true hero, to the bitter end.*

If this was the end, it certainly was bitter.

### *Jessie*

'Any news?'

'Nothing. No sign of him on the streets, and no trace of him at the crime scene. Molly's dead which means he's either been kidnapped by Vultures, or he's still locked up in that godforsaken place. Jesus Christ, Will. Why couldn't you have just been at Whitechapel on time? You knew he was going to need a getaway driver when he broke out of jail.'

'Don't look at me. It's not my fault he took too long picking the damn lock.'

'If that's your apology, it's terrible. It *is* your fault. You could have waited. Just because you had a bloody date with that drip who works down the pub doesn't mean that you have an excuse not to be there when your boss needs you,' Jessie was close to tears as she aimed her anger at Will, questioning his dedication to the cause. Parker was her closest friend, her brother in arms, and now he was locked up for a stupid mistake that was totally out of character. The first thing he always did was to check the security cameras, and for him to miss it this time raised questions.

Hurricane had been set up, and it was up to them to figure out just who had done so.

'Jerry is not a drip. He was actually quite sweet.'



‘God knows he needs to be to deal with you,’ Harry strolled into the main office, dropping his jacket onto the nearest chair. It was his blasé attitude that reminded Jessie of his uncle. Crow had raised Harry after his parents had disappeared when he was seven, but now the old man was barely recognisable. It hurt Harry to see him that way, his father figure not even remembering him. After one particularly gruelling visit, Crow had been moved to a different institution, and Jessie was positive it was the same place Parker was stuck in.

‘But I don’t think that’s the point Jessie’s trying to make,’ Harry turned to face her, blue eyes meeting hers. ‘Evie’s trying to track him now. I don’t know why she’s bothering. It hasn’t worked the past one hundred times.’

Evie Kyle preferred to go by her alias, Brain, anyone with enough sense knew that. She could usually locate the mind of whomever she thought of, an ability that had come in handy on more than one occasion. Those she was closest to she was able to locate more easily, and so finding Parker should have been a breeze. There was something stopping her this time, and it was frustrating the members of Wings more than they cared to admit.

‘And they call me a pessimist.’

‘Shut up, Skelly.’

‘It’s Skeleton. You know I hate Skelly.’

‘Yeah, well, I hate your face most of the time and I have to put up with it,’ Jessie watched on, trying not to laugh as Harry and Will embarked on one of their many arguments. If Parker had been there, he would have joined in, coming up with much better insults than the ones leaving Harry’s mouth. For a moment, she was expecting him to walk through the door, and felt her heart sink when she remembered that he wouldn’t.

‘Just stop it, both of you. Arguing isn’t going to get us anywhere,’ the buzzing in her pocket interrupted her, ‘For God’s sake, now what?’

She wasn’t surprised to find out that Clyde needed her help yet again, her fellow team member not used to being out on the field alone. Now that Parker was gone, Wings had been forced to stretch their resources, and that meant more solo missions than any of them would have liked. The vigilante known as The Sight had been sent out that morning, Jessie sending him on the hunt for anything that might lead to finding Molly’s murderer.

‘You need me to go with you?’

‘I’ll be fine, Harry. You stay here with idiot over there, and keep an eye on Brain. You know what she’s like with the headaches, and I have a feeling it’s going to be a painful one today.’

Leaving the two boys, Jessie began to make her way to Molly’s house where she knew Clyde would be. On the mission, they would go by their pseudonyms, any civilians believing they

were just kids messing about. Her fellow superheroes had named themselves after their abilities, all of them except Parker, who had taken after his father. Jessie had named herself after her favourite Queen song. White Queen, back in action.

She'd hadn't exactly told Harry and Will every detail of Clyde's text when she left, an attempt to not cause any more tension in the group. Parker had kept many a secret from them during missions, not wanting to worry them and wanting to dive headfirst into the danger. Jessie had always moaned at him for that, and she rolled her eyes as she finally understood why he always did it.

It was difficult being a leader. It was like being a parent, wanting to look after every member of the team and not wanting any of them to get hurt, even if they were superheroes.

'How in the hell do you do this, Parker?'

Jessie couldn't tell the rest of Wings the truth, not when it scared her just as much as it would them.

Clyde had found Jack Dempsey's body at Molly's house, the murder scene almost identical to that of the former Vulture. If he was dead, it meant one of two things. Molly had been lying to Cyclone from the start and revealed her past to her loving boyfriend, or Vultures had started killing civilians.

Jessie didn't let herself think about the other possibility. It frightened her to think that this might not have been Vultures at all. And if it wasn't, if it was just a copycat killer, then what in the world were Wings really up against?

Parker had always said that there was a war on its way. Jessie had a feeling that the first shots had already been fired.

White Queen, The Sight, Brain, Skeleton and Raven. They all made a brilliant team. But they were nothing without Hurricane, and it was now that they needed him more than ever.

'Parker, please. Just come home.'

*Birdsong*

My mother wanted to call me Elizabeth and my father wanted to name me Annette. They compromised, and I became Lizette. My name had no meaning but symbolised an argument resolved. Unintentionally, I became a symbol for peace in my family.

I pose my right hand on my cheekbone. I'm not supposed to look directly at the painter. So, I must pretend to be interested in the blank, beige wall. I wish I had something to read, even an oven manual. I'm wearing a simple white dress and brown sandals, with a beige cashmere scarf around my neck. The Mistress thought it would make me look regal. And they put a ridiculous frilly bonnet on my head, which shows how much they want to hide my natural, hard, kinky curls.

Sometimes, I imagine that they believe that I was born with white skin. But that I willingly had it removed, as a part of a tribal mutilation ceremony. They've made up a narrative to turn my blackness into a defiant choice against their racial purity. They must spend a lifetime making me suffer to convince me that I'm the villain in their story.

The painter introduces himself to me as Harold. He asks me my name. When I tell him, he asks if that is the name my parents gave me. I shrug my shoulders, as if it matters. He asks me more questions. He wants to know about my family, why they chose my name, whether I get to go to church, when I was brought here and how long I have been working for my Master.

My Mistress looks bewildered. She asks, 'Why do you want to know about a common house slave?' The painter laughs, nervously. He tells her that he didn't mean to upset anyone. He's just curious about 'these' people. My Mistress lets out a sigh. The inquisition is over. He doesn't ask any questions. He tells me where to sit.

I was picked for this portrait because I have small features, or as my Mistress drawls, 'an elegant physique.' Even when they give me a compliment, they must mention my body. My body is the only thing they value people like me for. They parade us at auctions. The strongest are sent to the fields. The weaker, or in my case, children are to work in their owner's home. In my 'lucky' case,

it's carrying heavy trays full of breakfast cutlery and scrubbing their white linens till my hands bleed, being on-call, night or day, to serve their every whim.

He is sketching my outline.

Later that day, I am bringing my Mistress her nightly tea in bed. She looks at me exasperated. She asks me to close the window. She wants to sleep in tomorrow. I close the window. She left the window open last night to let the heat out. The following morning, she told me that the birdsong inconvenienced her. It's a sweet, hopeful melody but she doesn't need hope. She needs more sleep.

I bow my head, swallowing the vicious bile. I dare not lift my face up and tell her what I really think of her. I hold back the signs that a woman exists in this body, an angry, alive woman who puts the men in line and shakes the women's bonds free. Most of the time, I ignore her. She frightens me. I leave her and go check on Miss Summer.

When I step into her room, I hear 'Drusilla'. Although, when I arrived we were both children, a decade on, she still behaves like a child. When I was first brought here, Miss Summer was reading Cinderella and decided to rename me one of the ugly stepsisters. Since her Cotillion, everyone in town rejoices about her beauty. Gentlemen praise her womanly figure. Miss Summer is talked about by everyone. Miss Summer is complimented on what a beautiful house she keeps. It has been a tough, thankless job to create the home that Miss Summer will live in.

She gives me a bright smile and orders me about. Our usual conversation. I am focused on polishing her ornaments when I feel my bonnet being pulled off. I am startled and turn around. Miss Summer is laughing. She's playing a game with me. She wants attention. She pulls my braids. Each twist is pulling at my scalp, telling me to not react but accept the net I'm ensnared in.

I ignore her and continue my chores. I imagine her breaking me down in her mind. She passes on an insulting compliment about my 'large' figure and I put on my driest tone and thank her. She wants me to play this game with her. But I play dead. I keep cleaning. She gets bored and goes back to her mirror to inspect her pores.

I leave her room and make my way to the kitchen. On the stairs, I pass the son. I keep my head down. He grabs my arm and I look anywhere but him. He tells me, 'Come to my room tonight.'

I look into his unnaturally blue eyes. I imagine that most white girls think he's handsome. But if they looked into those eyes long enough, they would see a moving desert in search for a

water source. If they felt his hands on their bodies, they would feel his bitter soul squashing any remnants of life. I shrug my shoulders at this disillusioned visitor. He misses the point.

I nod. He doesn't like it when I speak. I interrupt his story. He denies any involvement in this narrative except as a benevolent Master. He releases my arm. I walk to the kitchen. I pour myself a glass of water to steady myself. They think I'm weak because my anger is not like theirs, forgotten in a moment. My anger is bitterly cold. My memories have been frozen over, keeping me in perpetual retribution.

The bell rings. It's the Master. I go to drawing room. I find him reading, with a glass of port in his hand. I go to him and curtsy. He doesn't look up. I have ceased to exist in his world. People like me are just numbers on a chalkboard. My significance has been diminished to a statistic. He calls me Girl and motions for me to refill his glass. Once I do this, he waves me away.

I go back to the kitchen. It's empty. The servants have gone home. I stand in front of the window. I open the drawer, where the matches are kept. I light the first match. This is for my Master and Mistress. I drop the match, purposefully. I light a second match. For the Son and Miss Summer. I let it drop. I light the third match. This is for me. I don't need to do anything else. Master always keeps all the doors and windows shut. It's their fault, really. They made me grow up. I step out, onto the patio, and watch the flames rise.

#### IV. SCRIPTS

*Preparations for a funeral*

CHARACTERS

LISBETH	A black female
MILENA	LISBETH's girlfriend, a white female
MARY	LISBETH's affair, a white female
KEVIN	LISBETH's father, a black male

*A blank stage with a COFFIN at the back. MICROPHONES stand a few feet apart from each other in a line at the front of the stage. They all have their own spotlight. The actors never look at each other. LISBETH enters and goes to one of the MICROPHONES in the middle.*

LISBETH        I always was afraid of dying. I used to get panic attacks about it, waking up in the middle of the night. The thoughts about being dead, being bodyless and without consciousness made me shake and cry. And now that I am dead, I have to say, it's quite chill. I mean, I am still here and I can talk to you. The only thing to complain about is that it's boring. And I mean, so boring. There is nobody to talk to. Not that I'm exceptionally interested in talking, no, all my life I found talking to people incredibly dull. But now that I can't do it anymore, it bothers me. Isn't that funny? How you miss the things you actually dislike when you can't get them anymore? I always hated my body, my small nose, my basically non-existent tits and my short legs that rubbed against each other when I walked. And now that I don't feel my body anymore, I want it back. Not the sick one that made me die because my cells decided to kill one another, but one that at least hurts when I poke it. Well, I guess it's not too bad. They give you one set of clothes when you arrive here so at least I don't have to worry about that anymore.

*MILENA enters and goes to the microphone next to LISBETH's.*

MILENA        Lisbeth texted me. 'I have cancer.' Literally, that was it. And I called and I wanted to know how she was doing, but she didn't pick up and I didn't see her for the next three days. She could never cope with her emotions. When we first got together three years ago...

LISBETH        Three and a half actually...

MILENA ...she couldn't ask me out. *(smiles)* I knew she fancied me, so of course I asked her. We worked together in that coffee shop and I fell in love with her the moment she said 'Hello.'

LISBETH *(not looking at her)* You never told me that.

MILENA And after we got together she never told me she loved me. I know she did but she could not tell me. We wanted to have children together. But then...

LISBETH Then I started fucking someone else.

MILENA ...then money got in the way. And work. And all these things. When she was diagnosed there was no considering it anyways.

LISBETH Well, not for you. Because you're a coward and you've always been a coward.

MILENA I think she took the diagnosis well. Obviously, you don't hear that you have cancer and do a happy dance. But she is the strongest person I will ever know.

LISBETH The doctor who told me I had cancer was wearing green shoes when she did so. The clinical kind of green that smells like sanitizer. And I thought, well, that's gonna be my life now. When she told me, I didn't hear it. She just spit the words out between her lips. I think I have the same lipstick, Number 34 'Pleasure Me Red'. She looked concerned, but I didn't see it. I went back to the train station and I although the streets were full, I was alone. I sat in Starbucks and chewed on sweetener thinking that's what death tastes like.

*MARY enters. She goes to the MICROPHONE next to LISBETH's.*

MARY Lisbeth has the greatest tits in the world. They are like pancakes. Round and warm and delicious. When I met her, she already had cancer.

LISBETH But I didn't tell you.

MARY She only mentioned it to me two weeks ago. Fucking selfish, that girl.

LISBETH I didn't want to hurt you.

MARY I mean, if I had cancer, I wouldn't go around screaming it from the rooftops, but I'd at least tell the person that licks my pussy.

LISBETH But we were never serious. You were never serious.

MARY We met on a night out. She was dancing with her friends and I saw her tits and then her smile and I just had to go over. Thank vodka for my courage. I danced with her and then just thought 'fuck it', leaned forward and kissed her. And God, she was hungry for it. When she later told me she was in a relationship, all I could think was, 'Well, it can't be a good one'.

LISBETH and MILENA *(together)* We were happy.

LISBETH For a while.



MARY I think she loved her girlfriend Helena...

MILENA Milena, you little shit.

MARY ... but God, that girl had a thing for me. After we went on our first date...

LISBETH We were in that kebab store near the elementary school. I was so nervous I had to repeat my order three times. She knew – of course she did. Her nail polish was dirty yellow and scratched off from half of her fingers. It was the most beautiful painting I'd ever seen. She had fries. Just fries, she doesn't do sauces. When she licked the salt off her lips, I felt alive.

MARY After our first night, she showed up at my doorstep. Just like that. *(laughs)* The little stalker. We said goodbye half an hour before that. She insisted on walking me home...

MILENA *(interjecting)* How romantic.

MARY Then she called me and said she was still in front of my house. I went downstairs and we kissed. Her lips were cold, and tasted like menthol cigarettes. She put her hands over my ears and muted the world. She said she couldn't go home. We slept on the sofa. My bed was too small. She fell asleep immediately. I noticed how worn down and skinny she was. You only really see people when they don't see you. I wonder if she looks the same in her coffin.

LISBETH I don't know how I look. You don't get mirrors here. When you arrive, you get a small room in a colour I've never seen before. It's a bit green but it's also white and silver and grey all at the same time. There is a small bed in your room and a desk and a small bathroom. I don't even know why that's here. You never need the toilet after you die. And you don't shower because there is no water. You never get thirsty or hungry. As I said, it's no fun being dead. But neither is being alive.

MILENA I always wanted children. Even when I was a child myself. I got pregnant when I was 15.

MARY Funny that you turned out to be a lesbian.

MILENA But you can't have a child when you are 15 can you? I couldn't. I got rid of it. Lisbeth is the only person that knows.

LISBETH Mary wanted the picture book life. Father, mother, child, garden, golden retriever. When she couldn't have a father *(chuckles)* because she was gay, she clung on to the other things even more. It was adorable and ridiculous. I never wanted that. I have no idea what I wanted. Not cancer, that's for sure.

MILENA I don't think Lisbeth ever wanted children. But she loved me...

MARY Did she?

LISBETH I loved you.

MILENA We went to the doctor. He told us we needed a sperm donor. And that he shouldn't be too hard to find. But nobody wants to give their fucking sperm to an interracial lesbian couple. Funnily enough that is. Every man is wanking into tissues or over their screen while watching porn and yet they haven't got any to spare.

LISBETH I only relied on men twice in my life. That was enough to learn to never do it again.

MILENA When I first saw Lisbeth after she got diagnosed, three fucking days after she was told she had cancer, the first thing she said was 'sorry'. She cried and apologised. And I asked her what she was sorry for, and she said...

LISBETH ...that I'm going to die.

MILENA I said that she won't. That she doesn't have to and we will find someone to treat her and that she is going to live.

LISBETH *(chuckles)* Which I did not. Quite obviously.

MARY When she told me, she was completely calm. I mean, it was only two weeks ago and now she's dead. I think she had already come to terms with it. We had Rum and never mentioned it again. I know she was going to die soon. I wonder what she looks like in her coffin.

*KEVIN enters the stage. He walks to the MICROPHONE next to MARY's.*

KEVIN Lisbeth always was different. She never cried as a child. She also never laughed. I mean, of course she did laugh, all children laugh. But when you looked at her, at her tiny brown eyes that were hazelnuts, she was never there.

MARY *(laughs)* You little weirdo.

LISBETH *(laughs)* I was a bit.

KEVIN It wasn't weird though. Lisbeth always looked like she was developing rocket science theory. Not in the moment, but somewhere else, somewhere too significant to let anybody else into.

MILENA She was absolutely adorable as a child. Kevin showed me pictures. She looks like she could have starred an advert for nappies. Not even nappies, anything really.

MARY I bet you were cute back then.

LISBETH *(laughs)* Yeah, sure.

KEVIN I remember when Lisbeth was four years old, and we were on the playground. I chased her around through the moist sand. She loved running away. Guess some things never change. She tripped and laughed but when she hit the ground, all I could see was blood. She didn't move. And I thought for a moment: That's it. I ran to her and picked her

up. She looked at me and just said oops. Lisbeth's mum left when she was not even a year old. She does not even know her.

LISBETH I met her.

MILENA I was there.

KEVIN Which is an absolute shame if you ask me...

MARY (*dryly*) Nobody does.

KEVIN Lisbeth is nothing like her mum. She has a lot from me, but a girl should not grow up without her mother. I loved Elisabeth and since I knew she was going to leave after giving birth to our daughter, I was left with picking her name. I did not want to call her Elisabeth as well, so I chose Lisbeth.

MARY As if you'd forget the name of your wife after she fucked off if you didn't name your child after her.

MILENA Lisbeth found her mother through her aunt. Her mum never wanted contact with her, but when Lisbeth called her up to meet, she agreed.

LISBETH It didn't go great.

MILENA I think she expected a lot from it.

LISBETH I met my mother in the coffee shop where I worked at that time. I guess I needed a safe space. She doesn't look like me, but we act the same way though. She looks at people the same way. I hated it. I hate my own arrogance. I wasn't interested in small talk and asked where she's been all these years. She said she never wanted to have children. But when she got pregnant, she didn't have the guts to get an abortion.

MILENA Coward.

LISBETH I asked her if her life would be better if it wasn't for me. Her response was that it would not change her life. And that's the hard thing. She's never been my mum, but she's my mother. That has to mean something, doesn't it? But it doesn't mean anything to her.

KEVIN Elisabeth won't attend the funeral

MILENA Lisbeth always wanted her funeral to be a celebration. She said her parting is no reason to cry.

LISBETH I want everyone to start drinking in the morning, so they arrive in church pissed.

MARY Didn't think the lesbian was religious, did you?

LISBETH I want David Bowie's *Subterraneans* playing at all times because it sounds like death and so alive. Then I want them to eat spinach paneer curry and Churros, which is the ultimate expression of joy. And then drink a shit ton of red wine, dance, laugh and cry on the toilet. I want my doctor there with her shoes and her red lips, and Milena smiling like the first time she asked me out, shaking her curly hair and moving her long legs to Bowie.

And I don't care if I fucked Mary, I want her to be there and kiss Milena and I want them to go home together so they can be happy and have orgasms without me. I want Dad to eat as much as he can and then fall asleep on his chair like he always did when I was a child. I want my mother there and I don't want her to be sad – just to feel something.

KEVIN Lisbeth is going to be buried in the graveyard of the red church. Next to my parents. No father should have to bury his child. No child should get cancer. And everybody is somebody's child, aren't they? So, no one should ever get cancer.

MILENA Except for Hitler. Hitler should have got cancer.

KEVIN It's going to be a short service. I'm going to play Elton John and give a speech. I think Lisbeth would have liked that. She liked performing *I'm Still Standing* with a hairbrush as a microphone when she was young, moving her pink tongue between her missing front teeth. Milena and her parents will be there and her friend Mary, my sister and a few of her former teachers.

MARY I won't be there.

LISBETH You won't?

MILENA Shame.

MARY Fuck that. Lisbeth was my affair. We had amazing sex – that girl knows how to use what she has, let me tell you that – but she told me she was going to die two weeks ago. We never talked about it. She sent me a message earlier this week that she's back in hospital and not expecting to leave it alive.

LISBETH I wanted to see you so bad for one last time. And fuck me, that sounds so pathetic, but you are allowed to be a bit pathetic when you're dying from cancer, aren't you? That's why I texted you. I missed your cold hands and warm lips. When Milena was at ours to get me fresh clothes, I told you to sneak in.

MARY It took me ages to find the right floor and then the room you were in.

LISBETH (*chuckles*) Oh yeah, it did. When you entered the room was the last time that I smiled.

MARY You looked like shit (*chuckles*) in that awful hospital gown that didn't even cover your ass. Not that I did mind that.

LISBETH You crawled into bed with me and put your face next to mine and didn't say anything.

MARY I didn't know what to say.

LISBETH I didn't matter. When I woke up, you had left and Milena was asleep in the chair next to my bed. I died two days after that.

MILENA     I was there. She didn't speak for the last twenty-four hours of her life and just drove in and out of consciousness. I didn't feel anything when her heart stopped beating. I called Kevin, grabbed her stuff and left the hospital. I broke down when I entered our flat. We'll bury her tomorrow.

LISBETH    I miss my cigarettes the most. Not that I crave them, you never crave anything here and I think nobody ever really craves drugs. But they are a break, aren't they? While you burn every cell in your lung until it becomes black you can finally breathe. I don't know what to say to you as an ending. I'll be under the ground tomorrow. You're all lucky fuckers if you don't get cancer. And I know it's a damn nightmare being lucid but let me tell you: it doesn't get better.

*LISBETH goes to the COFFIN, opens it and lies down in it. MILENA, MARY and KEVIN leave the stage. SUBTERRANEANS by David Bowie plays for a short time. Black.*

## V. NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

### MERUNISA AHMED

SUMAIYA AHMED is studying English Literature with Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. She spends her free time binge watching shows she's already seen and thinking about the stories she has yet to write. She has self-published two collections of poetry, *Lost and Found* and *Reality* (2019), and has performed for Poetry Unplugged at The Poetry Café. Sumaiya also has a blog where she reviews books, food, and talks about Life & Other Things. She is currently in the middle of editing a novel, which she hopes to publish sometime soon.

JENNIFER AMMANN is a freelance artist and writer originally from Switzerland. After completing film school and working as an actress in New York, she moved to London where she is now studying Digital Communications at the University of Greenwich. Jennifer aspires to work in the media industry while continuing to pursue her artistic endeavours. In her free time she enjoys photography, modelling, drinking tea and watching horror films. More of Jennifer's work is available on her website: [jenniferammann.org](http://jenniferammann.org)

MAHIMA ANJUM is currently in her second year of her Creative Writing (BA) degree. She is a 20-year-old student who was born and raised in London. Mahima enjoys writing poems about love, heartbreak and everyday life. She draws inspiration from her experiences, from the people she has met and also the problems others have endured. She believes poetry is both a tool for self-expression and an escape from reality. Mahima hopes that her words will inspire others to articulate their own experiences through poetry.

OLIVIA APPLEBY is a third year Creative Writing student at the University of Greenwich, straddling southeast London and Kent. She sits on the anthology's editorial team for 2020, and – having moved on from self-publishing fan-fiction as a teenager – she is currently writing poetry around love and loss. In her spare time she indulges in stories across all media and enjoys a quiet life with her boyfriend. She enjoys work by Michael Faudet and Lang Leav. This is her second appearance in the anthology.

MAHBUBA BEGUM is 18 years old and studying at the University of Greenwich. She has no previous experience writing poetry, nor has she ever properly tried to excel in its art form. However, since starting university she has been able to express her emotions on paper and write about the prominent anxieties of life. She can at times be shy or even see herself as anti-social, but she hopes people will read what she has written for this anthology, as it is going to be the first time her work is noticed.

MARYAM BEGUM is an undergraduate at Greenwich University, studying English Literature. Maryam has been extremely fortunate to kick-start her writing career at an early age. She has published a graphic narrative (with her classmates) while in school entitled 'unheard voices'. '20 years' will be Maryam's second publication. It is a powerful read with an emphasis on self-acceptance and wholeness despite personal challenges. As an introvert, Maryam struggles with public speaking. Writing on the other hand – be it poetry, journaling or blogging – has given her the ultimate opportunity to powerfully express her concerns, thoughts and feelings confidently and to connect with others on a deeper level.

SHUZNA BEGUM is a poet in progress and a student currently studying English Literature at the University of Greenwich. She lives with four siblings and a cat; however, the buzz of her life doesn't hinder her creative flow when writing poetry. Instead, she finds she can work best when shut in her room yelling at anyone who dares to interrupt. Despite being a beginner in the art of poetry, Shuzna has already explored and crafted several poems such as villanelles, haikus, sonnets and free verse. Her poem 'Colours' is among the first poems she has written and predecessor to many more.

ALYCIA BELL was born in Ashford, Kent, on the 7th of February 2000. At a young age, her Nan inspired literature through storytelling and reading, thereby motivating her to pursue the craft as more than just quality time spent together. Growing up Alycia spent much of her time in 'La La Land', as her family described it, where she used her imagination as a creative outlet for her young experiences, delving into prose, scriptwriting, and poetry as a way of expression. Desperate to expand her skills she travelled to London after her A-levels to pursue a degree in creative writing.

ANNE BLOMBACH was born in Germany and, after finishing her A-Levels there, moved to London in 2016 to work as an au pair. She fell in love with the city and decided to stay in England permanently. After some work experience she ended up enrolling in the Creative

Writing programme at the University of Greenwich in 2018. Apart from working as a Student Ambassador and a nanny, she is also an active part of the student-run Feminism Society and Eco Team Greenwich. Once finished with her studies, she is hoping to pursue a career in journalism, publishing and/or poetry.

RYAN BRYCE is a contemporary spoken word poet and a third year Creative Writing and English Literature student, currently writing and compiling their second anthology 'painful porcelain,' among other projects. They are part of the anthology's editorial team for 2020, having been twice published by them previously, and last year they were part of Projector Magazine's editorial team as an Assistant Managing Editor. They write to breathe and breathe what they write, and their favourite authors are e. e. cummings, Sylvia Plath, and Kate Tempest. In their spare time you can find them in a smoking area convincing anyone who will listen that they're clueless, with a cigarette in one hand and a pint of dark fruit cider in the other.

NICOLE BUTLER is a second-year creative writing student who also studies Mandarin. She has had a passion for creative writing from a young age and her poetry is largely inspired by time and the fragility of it, giving it a voice to be heard.

GUZEL CELIK was born in the Netherlands and recently moved to London to fulfil her dream; she has no idea what her dream is yet but she's figuring it out. Her parents are Turkish and she has two sisters and one younger brother. She is currently studying Tourism at the University of Greenwich because she wants to find a job through which she can explore and learn about the world. In her free time she likes to paint and write and she would love to publish a story of her own someday in the future. She goes where life takes her.

ZARIN CHOUDHURY was born in London in 2000. She is currently enrolled at Greenwich University as a first-year student, studying English Literature. She aims to get her degree and pursue writing as a career, aspiring to be a successful author. Writing has always been a significant and consistent part in Zarin's life. She thinks of it as imprinting art that is expressed in the form of well-written thoughts. She believes that it is not only a way to escape or create a fantasy world, but also a way of expressing one's individuality, fabricating something special with imagination and prominent past experiences.

MICHAELA CORCORAN is a third year BA Hons English Literature and Creative Writing student due to graduate in 2020. She found inspiration for her short story 'Tommy Gun' in the



current statistics of knife crime and the innate drinking culture of Britain, one victim of such a crime having been a family friend, Murdoch Brown, who was murdered in Colchester, Essex, in May 2019. The poem, 'RAMBO', is dedicated to her Great Uncle, Jimmy 'Rambo' Gilbert, who passed away in 2010.

ELENA DEMIREVA is a creative writer and aspiring graphic designer with a passion for storytelling in all its different and beautiful forms. Prominent themes in her work are her early memories from her home country – Bulgaria. Elena lives through creative expression and has worked in some of London's most renowned museums and galleries. She is a passionate advocate for animal welfare and mental health awareness and a volunteer at TEDxLondon, The Cinnamon Trust and REDOM. You can find more of her design work at [elliedemireva.co.uk](http://elliedemireva.co.uk) and her writing at [elliewrites.myportfolio.com](http://elliewrites.myportfolio.com)

ROBYN DEVON is a second year Creative Writing student at the University of Greenwich. Previously she has illustrated the book cover for the published novel *Triskele 25* by Stephanie Taplin in 2013. Career wise, she has been flying with EasyJet as Cabin Crew since 2017 to fund her micro adventures and dark tourism trips, to Chernobyl and the Venice San Servolo insane asylum to name a few. Hailing from Gravesend, Robyn now lives in Crawley with her fiancé Ben and mini-lab Rooty, working on her first novel and other creative endeavours.

CHELSEA EMMETT is currently in her first year of studying Creative Writing with English Literature. Her work is somewhat semi autobiographical and takes a personal approach to what it is like to be a teenager suffering from a mental illness. She aims to bring some light-heartedness as well as creativity to understanding what it is like living with illnesses like depression, while also enjoying the creative outlet that is prose and poetry writing.

TEREZA VICTORIA FIALOVA is a determined young lady; her fascination with the world, keen interest for global affairs, and passion for traveling have brought her to the University of Greenwich. She has always been very passionate about learning new languages and is currently studying Languages & International Relations. Having been born and raised in the mesmerizing city of Prague, Tereza Victoria has developed a keen eye for details. Her cultural background has also inspired a deep passion for architecture and poetry. Her passionate and determined character always pushes her to accomplish her goals and fulfil her potential.

EMILY FISHER is a first-year English Literature student who is also studying creative writing in a Poetry and Prose module; she holds the ambition to become a recognised and respected poet. In her work Emily looks to creatively transcend sombre but personal subjects such as mental health, trauma, death and heartbreak. Her writing is conscious of nature and the environment, and the interconnectivity of each with human emotion. In her own words, Emily would not have survived 2019 without paper, pen and poetry and she is honoured to be included in the 2020 Greenwich Anthology.

MEGAN FITZGERALD is a third-year Creative Writing student who is currently nurturing a love for prose-poetry. She is an avid writer and reader and some of her favourite authors include Heather Christle, Alexandra Christo, and Brandon Sanderson. She writes to experiment and tries to push the written word to its limits, causing her to feel the restrictions of form. When she isn't writing, she can be found unleashing creativity in other areas such as drawing, prop design, etc.

ZUZANNA FRANUSIEWICZ moved to the UK in September of 2018 to study Sociology and Psychology at the University of Greenwich. London quickly became her favourite city in the world and right now she cannot imagine living anywhere else. Apart from studying, she works in Lower Deck and Change, so whether you need a drink or a cup of coffee, she's got your back. Zuza has only recently discovered her passion for poetry and decided to share her work with the world for the first time in the Greenwich Anthology. She says that writing is very therapeutic for her and helps her let go of some negative emotions.

ELEANOR FREEMAN was born and raised in South London and has always had an interest in the art of storytelling. Throughout school she was commended for her abilities in English and literature, which was mostly due to living in a family that heavily encouraged literacy and reading. Therefore, once out of school, she was accepted into the University of Kent in 2017, only to drop out a month later. However, after two years of working and writing as a hobby, she was accepted into the University of Greenwich where she currently reads Literature and Creative Writing.

ALEKSANDRA GATZ or, as people usually know her, Ola was born in Poland. One of her biggest dreams was to live in London. Now she is a second year Sociology and Psychology student at University of Greenwich and couldn't be happier. Poetry, for her, is a way to deal with all her emotions and to escape from the world when it all feels like too much. When she is not working or studying, usually, you can see her having a caramel latte in Change or Gin&Lemonade

in Lower Deck with her other half. Ola has no idea yet what her plans for the future are, since she prefers to focus on what is happening now and to enjoy every moment.

MONIKA GENOVA, also known as Miroslavova, is a Bulgarian poet who makes a point of looking for poetic inspiration in unconventional places, such as hamsters, science, and Eastern European folklore. She uses rhyme to deal with what some people call ‘the unfairness of life’, and others – depression. She calls hers Joey. Breadcrumbs in Monika’s poems very often lead back to Eastern Europe. Even though she writes mostly in English, she signs her poems with her middle name (Miroslavova), which in Bulgarian means ‘peace’ - a meaning which poetically fits her ideology as a writer.

ANDREA GRAHAM is an undergraduate studying Creative Writing and English Literature at the University of Greenwich. She has previously worked within Finance and Local Government and now has embarked on an exciting challenge to pursue her passion for writing and focus on becoming a writer. Andrea loves to explore various avenues of writing; although her desired writing genre is the form of novels, she also loves to experiment with poetry, using it to express her thoughts, feelings and worldviews – both for herself and for the engagement of a wider audience.

NAOMI GREEN is a second year Creative Writing student. She can usually be found chasing animals down the street or filming covers for her YouTube channel - *Disarray*. She feels most at home when writing poetry or songs that are inspired by dreams, cinema and the messes she gets herself into. After graduation, she plans on travelling the world whilst singing and showing people her poetry, to fund a house large enough to home as many children as humanly possible. And by children she means animals.

CHRISTY GUICHARD is a second year student, studying English Literature and Creative Writing at an undergraduate level. Christy was born in Leytonstone and grew up in the Waltham Forest area in Greater London. Christy found inspiration for poetry at an early age as her favourite place to play was Lloyd Park, which houses the William Morris Gallery. Upon discovering Morris' poetry and being inspired by Morris' poem ‘Every Poem is Perfect’ in particular, Christy began writing poetry of her own and her dream of becoming a professional writer was born. By completing her degree in English Literature and Creative Writing, Christy has made the first step to fulfilling this dream.

ELIN HANSSON is a Library and Information Science student at Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden. Her passion for language and literature have brought her to the University of Greenwich in her fifth term, to study English literature and get a better idea of what it is really like to live in England (she is seriously considering moving here; she loves England!). When she's not busy studying or visiting England to see her partner, she likes to write music, bake, crochet, read books and write short stories. She has an unhealthy obsession with cute bird videos, moomin mugs and anything mango flavoured.

SABIHA ISLAM is a third-year English Literature student. Her yearning soul is seeking spirituality and the meaning of existence. Her enthusiasm for literature followed her to school, where the library found her as a confident, bright and trendy soul searching for words to express her warm nature. Her poetry is inspired by her religion – orthodox Sufism – and love. She is addictively funny and her friends admire her chic and bohemian sense of style.

CIARAN KELLY is a third-year creative writing student, who originally enrolled to improve his prose and ended up finding a love of poetry and scriptwriting along the way. As a London-born Irishman, his appreciation for prose started at a young age, when he would write stories about dinosaurs going on adventures in handmade books. Thankfully, he has stopped writing in gel pen.

YASMIN KHAN is a third year English Literature and Creative Writing student. Her love for and fascination with novels and short stories began when she first learned to read. Her favourite writers are Neil Gaiman and George Orwell. She originally planned on studying chemistry or biology at university but at the last minute she ended up enrolling in an English Literature degree, a decision she is happy with, seeing as her reading list seems to be never-ending.

NELE LETTOLF is in her second year studying Creative Writing and English Literature. Apart from her studies and working for the Students' Union, she acts as President of the Feminism Society and a Societies Executive at Greenwich University. Nele is mostly interested in reading political and philosophical non-fiction as well as Feminist theory, and enjoys writing plays, prose and poetry. Having written and put on a play for young adults in her hometown of Hanover, she hopes to work as a dramaturge after graduating.

HANNAH LETCHFORD is a third-year English Literature student at the University of Greenwich. Hannah was first inspired to write poetry and prose when taking a Creative Writing

module during her first year at the university. She hopes to keep writing after graduation, with hopes of becoming a published writer one day.

LYDIA MARSHALL was born on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1995 in Islington, to Caribbean parents, Richard and Elizabeth Marshall. Her dad is Jamaican and her mum Trinidadian. As a child, Lydia was always a creative individual and it was clear to everyone that she had a deep passion for music, reading and writing in particular. She truly thrived in those areas and as she grew older her creativity grew with her. Lydia is now a published author of the book *Purpose* and is studying Creative Writing at university, hoping to develop as a writer and to pursue a career in the field.

DORATHEA GRACE MCKAY is a first-year creative writing student from the USA. Although she prefers to write novels, her classes have also introduced her to the joys of writing poetry. The two poems featured in this anthology were inspired by her homesickness during the first term of the year and by her time living in Virginia.

GRACE MCTERNAN is a 20-year-old bisexual writer from London. She is studying Creative Writing and English Literature and in her spare time she enjoys video games, palaeontology, calligraphy and embroidery, although she gains a new hobby each week. She dropped out of university just over a year ago due to anxiety and is very glad she made that decision. Grace hopes to become a published author and to own a cat.

SHENESE MOODLIAR is a 21-year-old creative addict. Having been born in South Africa and having spent her whole life travelling, she thrives on diversity and the urge to want to know and be more in our current society. She is in the first year of her undergraduate degree in Creative Writing and English Literature. Sheneese is an avid writer of all things, however she most enjoys expressing her raw self through erotica and she hopes people will develop a sense of appreciation and understanding towards this genre.

JACK MORBY is an eccentric young novelist studying Psychology at Greenwich. He is most often spotted in the library, leaning over a work of fantasy fiction, or tearing his hair out at a journal article. He previously worked in the music scene – playing live guitar in rock bands or composing a piece of jazz when inspiration strikes. When not working or studying, he likes to pass time with a good book or video game. Jack is from West London and aspires to be a published writer. He is currently working on *The Chronicles of Aether*, a fantasy trilogy.

JAMES TIMOTHY MULHOLLAND is a 23-year-old second year undergraduate student studying Creative Writing and English Literature. James has Autism Spectrum Disorder, a lifelong condition that affects how his brain processes information. Despite this, James has a deep love for storytelling; his interests include writing, reading and watching horror films late at night. James believes that his autism provides him with a unique perspective on life, that it gives him the ability to view the world through other lenses. James' short stories and poems usually focus on themes of surrealism and social commentary and draw inspiration from myths and legends.

HUMAIRA PANDOR is a third year Creative Writing and English Literature student who has had the pleasure of working as part of the editorial team for the Greenwich Anthology 2020. It is her third time being published in the Anthology. She has always been an avid writer who has immersed herself in the art of poetry. She aspires to write her way up to being an accomplished and recognised poet and she thanks her fiancé Sabeer for his support and encouragement in this aspiration. Through her writing, she aims to raise awareness of issues such as social inequality, political injustice and mental health, one poem at a time.

EMILIJA PAULAUSKAITE is a second year English Literature student at the University of Greenwich. From a very young age, books and creative writing have surrounded her daily life. Her favourite writers range from the classic Jane Austen to J.K Rowling and Ian McEwan. Moving to London from a small town in Cambridgeshire has inspired her to place pen on paper and write daily. She hopes to one day become an author who can encourage others to fall in love with words and the beauty of literature.

TOM PORTHOUSE is a second year English Literature student. He is a mature student, returning to education in his early twenties after having left school at 17. He has a deep love of literature, travel and writing; all of which he hopes will be part of his future career. He is very inspired by gothic and fantasy literature, as well as nature and its immense inspirational powers. Throughout his studies and beyond, he hopes to be able to hone his writing skills and eventually he would like to work in the publishing industry as well as travelling as far and wide as possible.

LAURA REHBEIN

RACHEL REINHARD has wanted to become an author ever since her fifth year in school, which is why she followed her heart and enrolled in the Creative Writing degree at Greenwich

University. Her parents, relatives and close friends have been her main inspiration and have kept her dream going strong throughout the years. When not writing, she is usually filling her brain with knowledge by reading different genres, wasting time playing video games, or watching gaming videos online. She has been working with a friend on a complex dystopian fantasy story since 2012 and hopes to get it published soon.

HOLLY ROFF is a first year English Literature with Creative Writing student. She began reading avidly at the age of five, and started writing stories a few years later; her strong interest in reading and writing has only grown since. She loves to edit her friends' work and would like to become a fiction editor as well as hopefully publishing her own novel one day.

MARJANA SULTANA is a first year English Literature student. For her, the art of writing is a form of healing and letting go of certain emotions. Her poems are the embodiment of distressing themes such as depression, anxiety, insecurity and loss. However, the meaning behind them brings the light to love, learning about self-love and self-reflection. She takes inspiration from art, nature and music, with the latter allowing her to express her imagination with creativity and emotions. She aspires to become a world-renowned poet and novelist, in hopes that someday others will be inspired by her works and the message behind them.

FIYINFOLUWA TIWATOPE OSADIYA is a student at the University of Greenwich. Born and raised in Nigeria, he moved to the UK in 2019 to become a pharmaceutical scientist. Not being an outgoing person, one of the ways he spends his time (aside from being swamped with school work) is reading and writing. His approach is best summed up as, 'sometimes, writing is the best way to make your voice heard'. You can reach him at [osadiyafiyinfooluwa@gmail.com](mailto:osadiyafiyinfooluwa@gmail.com).

REBECCA TWITCHEN is a third year Creative Writing student and this is her third appearance in the anthology produced by the university. Her preferred form is minimalist poetry. You can find more of her work on her blog <http://wavesbybec.wordpress.com>.

PIPPA VECK grew up in the seaside town of Margate, which is often used as the background for her stories. Since she was little, Pippa has always loved to write and create worlds, with the aspiration to one day have her work published and encourage the next generation of writers. Throughout school, she battled with her mental health, bullying and her own sexuality. But her past strengthened her to become who she is today and it is the foundation of her work, with each piece spreading awareness, and voicing a message for those unable to speak up.

LAURA-JANE WILLS is in the third and final year of her degree in English Literature with Creative Writing. She is an avid writer and reader with an interest in anything that sparks an element of creativity – in the case of her piece in this anthology, superheroes. She enjoys classic literature, young adult fiction, and horror novels. For her Novel Portfolio at the end of the year she is aiming to write a horror novel based on fairy tales. She is also currently writing a dissertation on the evolution of representations of ghosts in British fiction, ranging from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

HODAN YUSUF is a third year English Literature student at Greenwich University. She is the Vice President of the Greenwich English Literature and Creative Writing society and she is also the Book Club Manager of the Greenwich Literature Book club. She decided to start a book club at the university in January 2019 because she wanted to read more books outside her course and wanted to share this aim with like-minded students. So far, she has read twenty-six books outside her course in 2019. Her current favourite authors are Elena Ferrante, Mackenzie Lee, David Levithan and Ian McEwan.