

# ANTHOLOGY

## 2023

Creative writing from  
the University of Greenwich

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 2023 Greenwich Anthology.

The Greenwich Anthology has become a University-wide institution, where students share their creativity and collaborate with peers studying a wide range of subjects and representing a huge range of interests. The short stories, poems and scripts gathered in this collection express the current concerns of our community in fascinating ways – and represent a valuable snapshot into university life in the twenty-first century.

It is inspiring to see the continued variety of creative thinking that fills the Greenwich Anthology year after year. This Anthology is also a special one since it is the first to be compiled on site at Greenwich since the pandemic (when work was solicited and edited remotely) and so represents a new chapter in the life of the university and its student body.

The Anthology has been compiled and edited by students studying the year three Contemporary Publishing course, working together on campus. Over the past academic year, members of this class have worked closely with students from various other courses to help them publish their best writing. The editorial process has formed positive collaborations, which will give those now published writers the confidence to continue creating and inspire them to

publish again. We hope you enjoy reading the creative pieces they have produced and we want to end this introduction with a big thank you to every student who submitted their writing to us.

## II. POEMS



RAJIYAH AHMED

*Words*

The mind's eye fails to bloom upon the tongue  
It is an act of your ancient past.  
Throats catch on fire, sorrow chords unsung  
Morning had come, daylight silence is cast.

Shattered souls in unspeakable still  
We must be hardened, shaped, and compressed.  
Mechanical hearts then lose their will.

Roars of freedom when the time is right,  
They will speak, honeyed voices alight  
Aged bodies long past our prime,  
Bled permanent on the canvas of time.

MAXWELL-STEVEN BAKER

*Shakespearean Sword*

A *passe* in the heat of  
battle, two sabres poised for  
gain against one another with  
one another.

You entice me with each  
parry of carnality, each feint  
of sweet seduction.

You *jour* I thrust, we fuse  
together, we crossover  
away from dignitary and the  
glint of blades allows a  
reflect, a tease of the white  
of the eye as we flood  
the battleground.

We engage and misstep,  
mistreat one another until a  
jacket, stained and damp,  
meets the mud we made  
between us; and your  
Shakespearean sword  
stands aloft.

Alone.

WILLIAM BEVAN-THOMAS

*The Gold Ring*

See the house there where it lies  
Underneath these darkened skies

Hop the fence and cross the yard  
This here job it won't be hard

Enter here but make no sound  
Don't know who'll be snooping round

See those stairs, go quickly up  
Down the hall without a thump

That's the door there on the right  
He should be there; yes, he might

Open it slow and quietly tread  
There he is upon his bed

Keep him still; I'll pierce his heart  
And from this world, he shall depart

Three, two, one, and stab  
That gold ring, be sure to grab

Stole from me he had one day  
On a tender night in May

Came right in with gun in hand  
Not a thought of life nor land

Saw that ring upon my wife  
And in the moment took her life

She he killed with little thought  
Now she lies, with sorrow and rot

Thanks to you, he joins her fate  
Never to make it to heaven's gate

So, out the window and down the vines  
Let's have a drink to happier times

*Lylacle's list of possibly plausible, rightly impossible things*

Back in the day, there was an old merchant ship  
That parted from shore for its last lengthy trip  
Ten hefty sailors took care of that boat  
Ensuring it always stayed right and afloat

But on this last trip, those ten men did fail  
As the ship was destroyed by a storm's great big gale  
Only the captain avoided the grim  
As he was the one man who knew how to swim

After two days and two nights at sea  
The captain touched land and rejoiced with much glee  
But quickly enough, he was found by some men,  
Who treated him much like an egg-laying hen

He was tied up in chains and shoved in a crate  
Which was thrown in a river quite sealing his fate  
As the crate barrelled down the river so quick  
He hit a huge rock as hard as a brick

As the crate burst apart, he expected to drown  
But to his great surprise, he didn't sink down  
Instead, he went up and straight out of sight  
And when all went dark, a new star shone bright

ABIAH BLAIR-FORD AND JUNIA DENKER

*Haikus on Midnights by Taylor Swift*

(1)

Opal midnight so  
Bright – lavender butterflies  
Flicker off my desk

(2)

Sway. Dreamlike. Barefoot.  
Scarlet sky; something special  
A legacy left.

(3)

At tea time I drink  
Vodka out of porcelain—  
Glass falls, problems spill

(4)

Magical film reel,  
Time can't stop me quite like you.  
Slow motion clockwork

(5)

Abandoned swing sets  
Squeaking in the rainy breeze,  
I will run away

(6)

Rainfall at midnight—  
Changing things you couldn't see  
Mirror version of me

(7)

Lilac mojitos,  
Crowded rooms: would you kiss me?  
I'm just wondering

(8)

Cat eyes glow through gloom,  
Wine dark glinting depths of hurt,  
Karma gleams so bright.

(9)

Martini glasses  
Shimmer in the smoky room  
Light breaks in crystal

(10)

Breathe. In. Through. Deep. Out.  
Can falling feel like rising?  
Soft waves wash over edges...

(11)

The autumn breeze on  
The spotless side of the street  
Blows all leaves your way

(12)

Running home to you  
Softly beautiful mundane,  
Where my heart can live

(13)

Eighth rank pawn scheming,  
Glossy figures kissing, check-  
Mate, I couldn't lose

(14)

Splashes of crimson  
Tried to cut myself loose, now  
I vow to be yours.

(15)

Marram grass breathing,  
Salt streaming south – blue to blue –  
Current withdrawing

(16)

Keeping this just ours...  
Don't want to exhale this love –  
Mon coeur est á toi

(17)

Rooftop games under  
Aphrodite – I, 2, 3 –  
When did it get dark?

(18)

A missed connection  
Transformed into a red string  
Serendipitous.

(19)

Amethyst tulle gowns  
Pour from the tomb that won't close –  
Wax bespatters you

(20)

Let go and just run  
Things you don't have to explain  
I too fall apart

FARRAN BOYD

*Dirty laundry*

Do I wear this shirt even if it's blue  
Like the one from yesterday

Do I match it with my shoes  
But they're still the same ones from yesterday

Does it make me clean?  
Or make me dirty?

In a world fulfilled with uncertainty

Don't think about yesterday  
Think about tomorrow;  
About the clothes that won't make me feel such sorrow

*Gone but not forgotten*

I watch you through the glass of your dispassionate face  
Glaring at the judge with an accurate chase

Of annoyance

For who took you away and  
Threw you in THAT place  
Without me there would be no trace

Of you

In my eyes  
Your calls show such a hurtful pace

To,

The caregiver of my race  
The freckled reflection of myself gone  
Couldn't even focus to tie my lace

The location of my birthplace  
No longer significant  
Knowing you aren't in my space

LAURA BROWN

*Northumberland: a hidden gem*

Northumberlandia  
Largest County  
Lowest Population  
Most Northern Region  
But divnt call it Scotland!

Endless sandy beaches,  
Rockpools and waves  
Coastal towns full of Northern accents  
Stotties for Breakfast and Singing Hinnies for me bait.

Fauna and folk songs  
Traditions abound  
Alnwick Castle  
Birthplace of Hogwarts  
Reivers and Romans  
Hadrian's Wall  
Medieval masterpieces  
Wondrous walks  
Breath-taking beaches

Cragside  
Armstrong's Trail  
In Rain and Hail  
Wallington Walks  
With Wellington Boots  
Bamburgh  
Sycamore Gap



Sea Houses  
Holy Island  
'Gan canny on the rocks  
You're close to the border  
Don't upset the Scots'  
Tyne full of Fog  
Great north Jog  
Earl Grey Tea  
This is what home is to me





CALUM CORRIGAN

*Cueva de Los Aviones*

Painted Abstract from Fractal Insight,  
Crushed in Dirt; Mysterious Plight,  
A Smattering of Seashell Jewellery,  
Extinct Minds Make Known their Beauty.

Sundering Forthright into Artistic Expression,  
Neanderthals' Palaeolithic Impressions,  
Ochre Caves Hid their Sublime,  
Archaic Experience of the Divine.

JUNIA DENKER

*Discredence*

Oh, all the dreams I've had, my dear,  
Crumbled under gravity –  
I never thought I'd get here.

I felt so fucking insincere,  
When goals stayed childhood fantasy,  
Oh, all the dreams I've had, my dear –

And all that could adhere  
was grief and harsh self-pity,  
I never thought I'd get here,

I let the stage lights disappear,  
I didn't have the pliancy –  
Oh, all the dreams I've had, my dear,

I saw them all too clearly,  
None but one outlasted puberty,  
I never thought I'd get here.

I didn't persevere –  
Now, there's mere dubiety.  
Oh, all the dreams I've had, my dear –  
I never thought I'd get here.

## Entfremdung

I used to write German poetry  
When I was unafraid,  
Now you can't read my diary.

When home-words were all over me,  
That didn't stick two decades,  
I used to write German poetry,

But it didn't feel like me.  
Then, English came – a cascade –  
Now you can't read my diary.

Before I let it take me  
and watched articulacy fade,  
I used to write German poetry,

Then, I bathed in treachery.  
I know you feel betrayed –  
Now you can't read my diary,

And I am overseas,  
Can you really miss a renegade?  
I used to write German poetry,  
Now you can't read my diary.

HAFSAH HAREEM FAROOQI

*Learning to fly again*

Who doesn't want to conquer the sky?  
What a thrill to feel alive.  
But what if your world crashes down?  
Tumbling towards the ground  
bruising badly,  
broken physically, emotionally.  
Hiding in a shell  
pouring down shower,  
what should you do then?  
Accept it or try again?

I say give it another go.  
Try to reclaim the feeling.  
Fly again.  
It will not be easy, but it is worth it  
Climb up the mountain.  
Be patient.  
Small steps  
may take longer  
but you will enjoy the journey.  
It may be hard to start from scratch  
but you can gain  
new learning experience, a fresh start to life.

What an exciting new ride.  
Hop on.  
Hold on tight.  
Keep your nerves in check  
This is a second chance.  
Hold it, utilise it and now take advantage of it  
make the most out of it.  
Don't let it slip away.  
Don't give up.  
Fly to the clouds.  
Reach the stars.  
You can live your biggest dreams  
by learning to fly again.



SHANE GIBSON

*The Voice of Barriers/No Barriers*

The voice that has b-barriers becomes—

A v-vessel drifting in the sh-shadow of a mental tide in silent  
nu-nuclear annihilation, becoming  
A c-cataclysm of unapproachable clarities that shapes itself into  
A null of s-sorrow that re-refines and warps into

Anchors to the tides that drowns the words in pain out of existence  
A s-s-singing blade swinging into chorus of the killing blow  
That laid bare the strength of the trembles  
Crushing the magic of the words

Now with an u-urgency to dance across the scarlet veil of the  
organs  
Empty-handed – armed – to squeeze the broken p-prism of life  
that held the fleshy f-f-fragile frame t-together

Turning broken letters into ch-chattering bullets and whistling  
spears that bows to the tyrants' grasp and becoming  
The stammer, my amalgam br-bred to ensnare the bones of the  
mind, transforming

Into a soul of unworthy truth, a bane of anger and v-vengeance...  
burning with v-violence towards  
The shell of a voice. Br-Broken.



The r-revelation crashing in from the broken lies that coast to the  
sound of

The voices closing deep within having f-f-finally laid down their  
tears.

It is enough to cr-crack the locks of an endless dream of f-failure  
and finding again—

It is enough to crack the locks of an endless dream of failure and  
finding again

The voices closing deep within having finally laid down their tears.

The revelation crashing in from the broken lies that coast to the  
sound of

A voice. Transformed

Into a soul of worthy truth, a bane of anger and vengeance...  
burning with violence towards

The stammer, my amalgam bred to ensnare the bones of the mind,  
transforming

Broken letters into chattering bullets, and whistling spears that  
bows to no tyrant's grasp, and becoming

Empty-handed – armed – to squeeze the broken prism of life that  
held the fleshy fragile frame together

Now with an urgency to dance across the scarlet veil of the organs

Crushing the magic of the words

That laid bare the strength of the trembles,

A singing blade swinging into chorus of the killing blow:

Anchors, to the tides that drowns the words in pain, into existence



A null of sorrow that refines and warps into  
A cataclysm of unapproachable clarities that shapes itself into  
A vessel drifting in the shadow of a mental tide in silent nuclear  
awakening, becoming

The voice that has no barrier and becomes truth.



SAM GILBERT

*Baggage/wreckage*

Don't ever tell anyone about our yellow vision  
of a freshly showered crowd of silver perverts.

Don't apologise for masturbating in his purple bed or  
for stealing redhead's vodka to fall down graphite stairs to be  
concussed, to be pissed on.

Don't let us slip through cringy neon cracks of dusty marble  
nostalgia;  
go out and buy us pink croissants.

Don't wish anthracite truth upon magenta youth-agents with piss-  
pints and sap-snarls and sniggers  
now that they have cribs and dresses, their own beige bricks, and red  
wheels.

Don't throw us a raft or send out a navy lifeboat,  
we're just rainbow-drifts, downstream in sexual deviant chaos rapids.

*Problems revisited*

We have a  
a  
not having had a

problem: one of us has  
problem with the other one  
problem, so what kind of  
problem even is that?

There wasn't a  
a  
a

problem until we made it into  
problem where you had  
problem with something I did.

And it turned into a  
and it was such a

problem with something you said,  
problem that we didn't even have this  
problem in the first place.

And I don't remember the  
who had it first and whether or not  
the underlying issue is still there.

RHIA HAYER

*Healing*

i could feel her eyes burn my side  
as I stared ahead avoiding  
she smelt every single lie  
her blood slowly boiling

never thought this day would come  
roles reversed and changed  
her emotions heightened, mine numb  
will we ever be us again

feel everything but nothing at all  
to be forgiven, without a word  
looking out but facing a wall  
everything we must unlearn

pain and relief fight for the spotlight  
I thought I'd die but I'm almost alright

## *Who you are*

Be who you are.  
We taught you how.  
If you don't know how,  
just look around.  
Be who you are  
but don't change.  
Stay as you are  
in that glass cage.  
Be who you are.  
Words we have to say.  
Words that echo in the past  
as all you are is taken away.  
Be who you are but fit in.  
Be who you are.  
Don't complain.  
Your ancestors so far.  
Be who you are.  
Not that – you're not enough.  
Go run back home  
if you think this is tough

Be who you are.  
Embrace it all.  
When they empty your glass  
believe it half full.

## Love

do not make love painful  
it is a beautiful thing  
it's being on the phone, twirling the cable  
and teasing like a kid

it's disliking not hating  
a love without condition  
it's about building up and making  
inconvenience never demolition

it's comfort and sharing  
giving your all  
old wound repairing  
the safest of falls

would you pick me over them all?  
shouldn't be a question at all

SIDNI HENDREN  
*Cosmic Confirmation*

It was our last night together.  
On the tennis court, we searched the sky.  
A shooting star sang to us.

*Words*

Silky sentences crowd the crevices of my subconscious,  
craving comfort in my vocal cords,  
begging for my tongue to caress their corners  
and taste the tension between my lips.  
Yearning for life on a single breath...

But I vomit disjointed syllables  
and the verbose verbiage lurking  
between my teeth reeks of shame  
as I vow to never speak again.  
I always was a better writer.

## *A Taste*

My delicate shell is freckled,  
spiderwebbed with hairline cracks  
threatening to burst open at the first sign of desire

Taste me, I whisper.  
My soft flesh,  
my yolk of sunshine.  
For I am weary, and I have waited so long.  
Let my walls crumble.  
Turn me inside out.  
Allow my tenderness to be savoured.

AIMAN ISLAM

*One last wish*

Down the valley of desolation,  
Around the corner,  
Just inches away from letting go.  
Will you hold my hand and tell me  
Everything is going to be okay?  
Will you lie to me one more time?  
Everything is a blur even from inches away;  
I reach my hand out into the void  
With little hope that someone  
Would hold this hand one last time.  
Instead, I can almost touch all the love I've never had.  
South of my skin,  
West of the borders where my sanity lies;  
Meet me at dusk when it's a new beginning.

*Anxiety, an old friend*

There they come.  
Through a field of roses.  
They come and sit next to me like they never left.  
Sitting around a campfire, I don't even notice how cold it is.  
Or maybe it's because I'm under their wings.  
I'm talking and smiling and living away my life.  
I look up to notice the flower field is gone.  
They were cut down and probably fed to the cows.  
The sky is not blue anymore and the fire has died down.  
I still don't feel cold.  
I feel their presence and I feel their warmth. I hadn't realised they'd  
    been sitting there all along.  
I look up but I see no face. I start to wonder if anyone notices  
    they're sitting right next to me.  
But it seems that no one actually has.  
Maybe they can't see it. Or maybe they're just not fazed by it  
    because it's been there so long.  
I'm familiar with it though.  
They do visit me from time to time, but they don't stay long that  
    often.  
I just erase my thoughts and sink into the warmth of the familiar  
    embrace.  
With all the love and warmth, I hadn't realised when I stopped  
    breathing.  
It's getting stuffy here.  
The fire is just smoke now. No one else is around.

I CAN'T SEE ANYONE ELSE. IT'S JUST ME. YET I DON'T  
FEEL COLD. WHY DON'T I FEEL COLD? I WANT TO  
BE COLD. I WANT TO FEEL SOMETHING. I NEED TO  
BREATHE. MY HEART IS ACHING. I NEED TO GET OUT  
OF HERE. I NEED TO BREATHE.

OKAY, I'M BREATHING.

Gone.

I snap out of it.

I open my eyes and it's that summer day again.

Out in the meadow with the blue sky and the campfire.

It's chilly now.

I see them right on the horizon. Staring at me.

I stare back.

They don't wave goodbye, because I know I'll see them again sooner  
or later.

After all, we're old friends.

## *Town of ghosts*

Vacant city, they thought.  
Streetlights were broken  
No shops to be seen open;  
Not a soul lingered there.  
The wind was awfully quiet.  
There was a fire in the distance  
That someone forgot to kill.  
Its flames were high with no intention of dying.  
The owner of the city seems to be missing;  
She had left her vacant city open to be explored  
Waiting for the right person to come and tend to the fire—  
To never let it die and never get burned.  
Travelers visited this town, but they all left a mess  
Until one gentleman came;  
Alone and needing refuge  
He built a home around the fire  
Let it warm him and he fed it his warmth.  
The city was at home again.  
The streetlights were turned on and shops were open;  
The fire roared in the centre of the town,  
No longer needing a keeper.

*My beloved well*

Familiar place, yet the touch of it feels different.  
I'm here again. In the depths of an abandoned well.  
Abandoned like the childhood I can barely remember, the  
    childhood I have no happy memories from. Abandoned like the  
    love I never received from the beings I call parents.  
I'm deep in the earth, a brick wall surrounding me. It's hard to  
    breathe but I'm used to it.  
Even on the surface with the blue sky above me, my lungs are tied  
    up. I choke on my words.  
I'll be here, waiting for the water to rise.  
Rise above me till my lungs are full of water. Till I'm floating inside  
    the well.  
Till I'm drowning.  
While I wait for the water to rise, I try to get familiar with the well  
    again.  
I don't pay it a visit as often as I used to. I don't stay here for days  
    and days anymore, and when I do, I bring my rope so I can climb  
    back up before the water comes.  
As I'm lost in my thoughts, I can feel the water starting to come  
    back. The coldness of it is not a surprise anymore.  
I sit there leaning against the wall and let the water submerge all my  
    senses.  
The icy water takes over my body. Suddenly I'm wide awake again.  
My heart beats faster than ever. My eyes look up to see the  
    beautiful full moon. It calls me home. But I don't want to go  
    home.  
Home is a wreck. There's no love inside my home.

My home is as abandoned as this well.  
Even with people inside, my home is deserted. Deserted of  
compassion and love. It's fuelled only by hatred.  
Selfish. Everyone around me is selfish. Everyone wants to be loved.  
No one is willing to love.  
The water keeps rising and I feel at peace. I feel at one with the  
well. The well was always there for me when no one else was.  
I used to detest finding myself in the well. Now I am at peace  
whenever I am here.

## *The sunken ship*

Anxious hearts don't sleep.

My heavy heart is sunken, and it forgot to set a timer to re-emerge again.

Re-emerge again free of sins and worries.

The whispers of the heart lie on the ocean floor.

They travel through currents of water, but they will never see the light above.

Anxious hearts are vagabonds in nature. They don't need much to dive back into the past.

One little nudge and hurricanes come down to sink the heart. It takes with it the mind, who is equally as guilty.

The time of immersion is never the same. At times they reach shore with no anticipation, and then there are times when I can't find them, even with fishing nets.

I cry and I cry, but I don't have anyone to listen – since I don't have my heart and my mind.

## Death

Look me in the eyes and tell me how you feel.  
Tell me if you're terrified as I approach you  
As I'm about to steal your soul.  
Are you scared to go to your new home?  
Where you can't move much and have no leg space,  
Where you'll breathe dust.  
Tell me how you feel  
as I come to take you with me  
to the land of empty bodies,  
where souls are floating in the sky.  
Everyone seems scared of me, but I'm so gentle.  
I put you to sleep so nicely;  
I take you to the land of dreams.  
No more stress for you to face.  
You'll be adorned in black or white  
Buried in a coffin or burned amongst the wood.  
Look into my eyes as I approach you.  
Tell me, you feel good

## *Castaway*

How are you?

Are you lost like me?

Are you a vagabond too? Searching for the lighthouse with the hope  
of being found.

Maybe gone astray and drowned. Do you want to be found alive or  
dead?

Oh, my dear friend, I cannot swim. I can only hope to be found  
soon. Maybe I wish to be lost, instead.

My frozen limbs are blue like the ocean I'm drifting in.

Floating.

Weightless.

Dancing with the waves.

I'm conscious, my dear friend. Maybe I'm in heaven. Is this what  
hell feels like?

I was promised hell would be hotter. Why am I not burning? Why  
is my skin so stiff?

Oh, my dear friend.

Have they found you yet?

Have you saved yourself?

Or do you want to be found dead, like me? Are you lost, like me?

*Dial M for Murder*

So many thoughts, yet you never leave my mind.

You ripped my soul, but I've always been so kind.

Pain, pain, pain is all that you left me with. Red stained wall; I  
committed a murder.

Gunshots, blood, my head is spinning; I'm crying: there is a flood.

Train wrecks, mind maps, hurricanes, all under the same roof;  
emotions, words, nothing is as it should.

I've lost it. I lost you.

You've gone so soon. This time you won't come back.

My hands are dirty. I see you in the reflection of the mirror; you  
stand there, lifeless. I committed a murder.

I killed myself to love you.

TOBY MILLIS

*Grave of the fireflies*

The sun continues to rise  
from its winter slumber,  
A raising of the heat and warmth  
in the atmosphere, it provokes a wonder,  
Here we lay wondering...  
The embers of the sun  
may burn the brightest,  
Is it the warmth within others  
we aspire to find?  
By the overwhelming fate of life,  
I write this poem in mourning.  
The routine darkness we face  
like night before a new morning.  
Provoking fear and sadness,  
Ear to ear with the madness  
of corrupted files, stuck with a smile,  
Hoping that one day it's overcome  
with a once loved brightness.  
Putting up strength,  
recommended to try and fight this.  
I thought I could see  
but I was matched by blindness.  
Down in the darkness I search  
for guidance in the tiniest of fireflies,  
But even the brightest of fireflies fizzle out.  
Amongst the vastness of the dark green leaves  
within the pond where the fireflies lay.

They fall in. We look out.  
Out of darkness we all fall out.

A few months later I look up at the stars,  
they are winking at me.  
It left me in a state of thought  
at night, continued to the day,  
When I looked down at the ground  
and the grass was waving.  
These actions felt human.  
A human presence in objects  
that disconnect us from reality.  
A reality where we encourage reuse,  
but issues feel recycled,  
Lives like bikes, rusting away,  
Carrying stress with punctured  
tyres out of the torrential rain.  
Punished by an unpredictable stormy weather,  
If you're caught off wind,  
you might get taken in by the waves.  
Like the Portuguese saying:  
'*Camarão que dorme a onda leva*',  
Sinking shrimps drown in slumber, find safety in sailing motion.

Birds who tried to fly through dangerous oceans  
are plucked of their feathers,  
Yet survived to make it through alive  
with tales of the dangers they experienced,  
Talked it out, no well run dry,  
having something to report,

Heavy tears form floods,  
but only in sadness do we mourn.  
Or may end up lost in our own thoughts.

## *Metal Desert*

Have you ever wondered what it would be like  
To pick up scraps of metal from the desert

Have you ever wondered what it is like  
When the desert is made from metal

Have you ever wondered what it would be like  
Surrounded by metal wildlife  
Spiders with ammunition cartridges for arms  
Bites like bullet wounds  
Scorpions with cannons for stingers  
Stinging sharp as shells

Have you ever wondered what it is like  
To be circled by metal birds of prey  
With the roars from engines replacing a beak  
And missiles replacing the talons

The desert is so damaged from the metal  
It's almost impossible to remember  
What the sand looks like

Es brent\*

*Es Brent. Briderlekk, s'brent.*

It's burning. Brothers. It's burning.

My town is small  
And at glance not cosy, or intimate  
The unforeseen imagery of prisoners  
Prior to imprisonment

But alas the people improvise  
Out of bare and broken bones  
For out of darkness cometh light  
They shall not die alone

א געשריי און געוואלד  
און א געפילדער  
א פאטער אין וואלד  
קינדער זיינע זוכט

Oy our poor town is burning

---

\* The Yiddish used in this poem is a poem-song written in 1936 by Mordechai Gebirtig. It translates as follows:

*It's burning, brothers, it's burning!  
Oy, our poor shtetl is burning,  
Raging winds are fanning the wild flames  
And furiously tearing,  
Destroying and scattering everything.  
All around, all is burning  
And you stand and look just so, you  
With folded hands...  
And you stand and look just so,  
While our shtetl burns.*

My room is not double in size, but half  
A mother of five lives in a room of ten  
Significant others and cousins link arms  
For warmth and comfort, never seen again

They hope that by facing outwards from their circle  
The gunshots from endless attack  
Would in return be less painful than  
Knives which could pierce close backs

קינדער, קינדער  
וואו זייט איר געוועזן  
מיר אויף וואס  
פארגעסן הוט איר שוין

A dull grey winter overcast as heavy as strong gusts of wind

They hope above for neither  
Or less than the worst experienced  
Hope for an 'ignorance is bliss' meantime  
To keep their good spirit in

To keep in spirit of squashed shadows  
The light of the righteous among the nations  
Or the power of the youth movements  
Of whom we commend their martyrdom and bravery

קינדער, קינדער  
אהיים קומט צו מיר  
אומעטיק איז מיר ווארום  
אליין צו זיעצן

To forgive,  
To forget,  
To overlook,  
To regret.  
My neighbourhood is ghettoised  
The mother of five in a room of ten  
Takes her fine carpet to the window  
To whack off the dust using the metal pylons outside

A frustrated father of six in a room of twelve built for eight  
To their disgust at the reducing of dust  
'You relieve your carpet when there's children to feed'  
The father beckons,  
'When their hunger makes it hard to be glad,  
When you strike your carpet upon the pylons  
The children cough and fear the bangs'

The mother, startled, turns and replies:  
'Would you rather dust or gas  
Would you rather be engulfed in flames,  
Succumbed to nothing but ash'

Some march to forests and others to camps  
There are no more Jews in my old town  
Thousands condensed to hundreds to tens  
To zero. Set alight by gunfire and buried in the ground.  
Civilians rocked in unsettling pain  
From their once thriving population



The victims were herded into trains built for cattle  
Clutching onto stale pieces of bread  
To forgive,  
To forget,  
To overlook,  
To regret.



ZAYNAH MUTTUR

*To study or not to study*

Why should we study?  
Is it all just a waste of time?  
Coursework, grades, references!  
Where do we draw the line?  
Undergraduate or postgraduate?  
Not to mention deadlines!

Either BA, MA, or PhD?  
What do we essentially gain from these three?  
Placements and internships actually offer a break,  
But should we consider it given how much time they take?

What about on the job training?  
In addition to all the money you will be making!  
What about work, experience and education!  
That's more than uni will ever be paying!  
Is this really how we should spend our day?  
Big universities and graduation ceremonies!  
Or is it all one big unorganized play?

So what does studying actually do?  
Does it give you fun, friends, freedom!  
Or maybe just a different point of view?  
For myself I have no idea?  
(I guess I'll leave it up to you!)



The hungry spoon out his  
insides and spoon him  
from his both sides  
As Figaro drops the needle  
the star tapestry rips  
to the sound of kitten tears  
and the needle's clink  
A blue fairy with a whip arrives  
she announces a flood  
when she whips the boy's  
wood  
'Why would you weep  
Pinocchio  
the real boys  
don't bleed sap'

Monster<sup>2</sup>

I'm told this monster is arbitrary  
She lurks within the depth of my  
    elevated heart rate  
She often makes breathing doubtful  
and oxygen

Oxygen which gives my  
elevated heart elevated pace again  
And when I think my heart  
    could not beat faster  
        it just does

I'm told this monster feeds on me  
Like a human parasite  
    that pills cannot kill; only suppress

I'm told this monster is arbitrary  
as she tells me that I could be that  
mummy-is-not-well-today-mummy

    but I don't want to be that  
    mummy-is-too-sad-to-play  
    -with-you-today-mummy

    or that I could be that  
    mummy-did-not-feel-like-  
    fucking-daddy-because-  
    she-was-not-feeling-like-it-

mummy-and-now-she-feels-bad  
-about-not-fucking-daddy-when-  
he-was-feeling-like-it-mummy

I'm told this monster is an addict  
;I thought about high fiving her  
We often scream together  
    underwater  
She is perhaps an underwater banshee  
as her screams never end  
I only scream when I  
    'm underwater  
knowing nobody can hear it  
    underwater  
But when I do scream  
    ,underwater  
the monster tells me the water underwater  
    is not a good enough sound barrier

I'm told this monster is shaped like a marble  
    ,just about the size of a strawberry I  
    'm told this monster is a  
    cactus, papaya, a  
    matinee

I'm told this monster is arbitrary  
and that hugs do not always  
mean something specific  
    This monster tells me some  
    hugs are too specific  
    and I often do not feel like

feeling anything specific so  
I flinch thinking that the other  
person could mean  
something specific and  
sometimes-I-sometimes  
do mean something specific  
but I flinch too because I'm afraid that  
the other person might not mean something specific  
What if I told you, you were my specific person, would you flinch?

This monster pierced my foot soles with a meat hook  
to hang me in the cathedral ruling Abney Park  
and embalmed me with the flowery smell of the  
rotting graveyard

Then she brought three grizzly bears and barricaded  
the cathedral; locking the scent inside a living tomb

I'm told this monster is arbitrary as she tells me  
it takes two full weeks to get used to my voice  
and 48 days to get used to my accent and around  
6 months to learn my surname  
I barely whisper when she tells me  
my European w sounds like a v  
So I lower my voice  
again  
only to scream  
underwater

I'm told this monster is arbitrary  
But she fills up the empty space

## Street Lights

*(after Joseph Beuys' Lightning with Stag in Its Glare)*

/they ask a little girl//would you thaw a stag before cooking him/or strip him bare to his  
bones/when you cook a stag/ his fur falls off/when you roast him it's the same//the girl drops

the

white

chalk/

it

breaks

into

two

pieces/

she reaches

for it and answers/

/once a stag is constructed

it doesn't find his home in a pot/ unless

you asphalt him there//she is told to fix her

posture and answer again/a stag staggers/bounces

and his glare gets lost in the streetlights/a stag staggers when his

flesh is ripped by the ever-turning wheels/a stag staggers whether you cook him

or not/he whines when you eat his meat with your bare teeth/the girl speaks again//

once a stag is constructed/he finds his place on a pan//why is a stag like a lightning

bolt they ask/the girl is silent//recite, speak up// do not cry for the stag/and she says

//all

stags

stagger

when

they

lose

their

hoof

count//

BETH E PEEL

*Breathe*

Air – oxygen, nitrogen  
quickly escaping my lungs,  
deflating sad balloons  
my broken heart beating like a hummingbird  
for survival.  
My fragile body deprived of the substance keeping me alive  
joy.

The air re-enters my lungs like a weight off my chest,  
literally, not metaphorically, my heart was working double time,  
fighting, and now I feel fine.  
Fine, such a dreary word to describe a pain like no other  
when you can't quite describe the aching and breaking inside.  
But now I can.

It felt like drowning –  
drowning and suffocating in a ball of darkness,  
the overwhelming emotions a teenager can't explain to her friends or  
too embarrassed too proud to admit you are defeated and broken.  
The darkness consumed me, my life and I couldn't escape  
the cycle of never-ending doom and depression;

but I did.  
Not completely, not overnight and not magically  
the cracks are still there glued together – I did that myself.  
It's sometimes still there, in a dark corner of my mind, trying to  
lure me back,  
back to the person I was  
the person I used to be.

AZEEMA RAHMAN

*Art*

You ask me what art is,  
I say:

What is art but the colour in your eyes?  
The intensity of its power in the light.

What is art but the beauty that lies beneath?  
Far greater than earthquakes, trees, autumn leaves, everything in  
between,  
Far greater than thunderstorms, black holes, and even the deepest  
of seas.

What is art but the way your hair or your hijab flows in the wind?  
What is art but all the scars across your skin?  
The way they tell all your stories from within;

What is art but the way that your features fit perfectly onto your  
face?  
The way all of the planets align perfectly in space;

What is art but the way that your body has been shaped?  
The body in which your soul has been framed,  
That puts even the best artwork to shame;

What is art but the way your voice sounds every time you talk?  
Every stutter, every stammer, that even stops the birds singing in  
awe;



What is art but every breath that you take?  
Far greater than the wind that sways sunflowers in the breeze.

What is art but the masterpiece in your mirror?  
Could it be any clearer?

What is art but the poetry within the writer's truth?  
What is art but this poem that holds true?

RUBAH RAFIQ RATHORE

*eclipse.png*

we were faux.  
but wherever you'd go,  
i'd follow —  
eyes closed,  
arms wide,  
tip-toeing on a tightrope.

a magsman of many talents,  
you spoke the language of deceit,  
a sound that was so sweet  
to the ears of the virgin:  
me.

we collide like an eclipse —  
a synthetic scene to descry.  
and there's a smile on my lips,  
as your hand tightly grips  
my porcelain heart.

but who do the cards favour?  
blindfolded,  
i toss the dice.  
i thought i'd rolled seven;  
yet you were truly five.  
unlucky me,  
i still cease to thrive.

but i believed it was fate  
and i believed it was true!  
that the gods had divined us,  
and had brought me to you.

but we were plastic.

a hoax,  
an imitation,  
a joke.

we are faux.  
but wherever you go,  
i follow —  
eyes closed,  
arms wide,  
tip-toeing on a tightrope.

DESANTILA QERIMAJ RRANXA

*Hands*

In the beginning you were innocent and naked,  
you knew well warm milk, your mother's smooth  
breasts, and you smelled of things with no past.

In the beginning you were innocent and naked.  
It is absurd you don't dream any more to touch  
leaves, fireflies, butterflies and fresh biscuits.

In the beginning you played only eternal future;  
empty thoughts trusted your resonant pureness,  
dolphins swam from fingers with laughing visions.

After the beginning you became pine trees,  
sturdy needles gripping what we asked you to,  
trying to get used to the parade of labour rules.

It makes sense why sometimes you are storms  
fighting to break stones, hiding the truths of my abyss.  
In the beginning you were innocent and naked.

Now tell me, dear hands! About losses you've yelled,  
lies, secrets you've kept. In the last hour you'll rest  
above my penitent chest, entombing your adversities.  
Yet in the beginning you were innocent and naked.

*In this room I curse me, I curse you*

Because I cannot leave it, lurking alone  
with the time I spent thinking about our shrinking hearts,  
I curse myself with the emptiness of this room full of objects.  
Each of them is an obsession in my hands measuring  
me within these walls along with a dead calendar.

The glasses are filled with tattered breaths;  
the radio is blue like blue for 'when we could be.'  
I have a grater in a woman's shape with no arms,  
my face in pain cries her missing flesh.  
Such blood of sadness pumping in this room—

On this table love swirls looking at me with the eye  
of a cyclops. She doesn't say anything, just  
unfailingly stares and stares and stares  
pities a messy soul, creeping in cold surfaces.

Because I cannot understand it, lurking alone  
with words unafraid to lose their righteous place,  
I curse you, and what becomes so hidden in you  
and the part where I should name this torment  
strange, unnatural, or a grave to my mooned smile.

The plates are filled with starving dreams, the window  
is closed like closed for 'when nothing awakes'.  
I have a mallet that when it tenderises meat makes a noise  
that thins my temples sending them to another world.  
Such bloody tenderness pumping in this room—

Love is still here; nobody remembers calling her!  
With so many names, I don't know which one to use. . .  
Perhaps, 'You, flowered dress of a girl, worn five years in a row.'  
Perhaps, 'You, knife stabbing in the back, whenever you want.'

MADELINE SALTER

*Untitled*

*~After Fiona Rae's 'Untitled (grey and brown)',  
displayed at the Tate Modern.*

Control

eludes in the spectrum of  
chaos.

But I find the infamous hourglass.

Vase or body of woman?

Stuffed with flowers

to wilt or love to

wither. There stands the idea of a tulip that can  
never bloom. Forever forced to live  
without ever having lived.

Tears from a

weeping pink eye

now a permanent stain on canvas skin. A  
crack

in the china — who was so careless as to  
drop her?

Hard enough to make reds frantically seep

from stretched skin, emerging from

the ditch greens, the slurried greys.

Filth mars a clean slate. Her heart bleeds

on the right as

buried under colour,

gleaming despite its muted silver,

the knife's blade

slices through it all.

Tits

~After Patricia Smith's 'Hip-Hop Ghazal'

Upon my naked body I first see — *tits*.  
Upon my body, buried under cloth; they, too, first see — *tits*.  
When they say 'eyes' I now know they really mean *tits*,  
two globes, magnets to the gaze of men.

Jugs! Melons! Bowling balls on a chest, they salivate  
over my wobbling mammary fat, 'cause all *tits* really are, are that.  
Before I knew 'heroin chic' was 'in',  
I'd wished dearly for them — *tits* as big as the universe!  
Slut if they're on show but, if hidden, apparently I'm 'shy',  
whatever comment my *tits* can make me cry.  
But whatever, Maddie, get a grip.  
At the end of the day, there are mammoth troubles  
that dwarf your *tits*.

*This Brutal Flesh*

Your arm, a strap  
    holds  
    our bodies closer  
    than skin knows how to be.

Liquid salt runs rivulets  
    into the confluence of  
    your stomach, mine, your  
    chest, mine

I only hope you'll never turn from this.  
Take a knife to flay us or let us  
    lay, not parting,  
    until like August heather

skin becomes bruised.

Breath flows into my breath, into your breath,  
    into ours —  
floods wings inside my chest as  
    hushed words of gratitude, pleading  
    let me take flight.

I am your doyenne,  
    of touch,  
    of viscous lust,  
all signposts  
    of your body  
    clearly marked;  
    a sustained heaving —  
    disruption.

I know this  
    to be the origin  
    of all being.

ALEXANDRA SERBAN

*Foreigner's inferno*

I looked at the sky  
and I said:  
Uite!  
she turned her head around confused  
and asked me:  
Ce se intampla?  
I was showing her the shooting stars  
but she won't see them  
I look at her again:  
Nu le vezi?  
She closes her eyes  
and rise her sight to the clouds:  
Nu vad nimic  
I lay on my knees  
and hold her hands she looks at me  
but I dont feel her  
Ma vezi? Ma simti?  
she sighs:  
Nu vad nimic  
she said again I touch her  
and I feel shivers  
Ajuta-ma te rog, she said  
I cry next to her  
And I pray  
Doamne ajuta-ne  
she breathes so loud  
I could hear her heart racing

○ sa ma rog pentru noi, I said  
Doamne ajuta-ne, she said  
Once again,  
we are in hell  
with doors wide open for the guests  
near the highest mountains and forests  
with the lowest vibrations at the highest point  
the Earth was trembling  
demons were catching our breaths  
smoke encircling us  
fog was surrounding us  
sky got darker  
and the land got sharper  
but we prayed  
once again  
Doamne ajuta-ne

## *Grocery list*

1. Love settles down strawberries
2. And maybe it could make you feel bananas
3. The smell of burnt butter on an early morning
4. The sound of the eggs in the pan
5. And the wind near the jam
6. Flour on my skin
7. Sugar in my golden-brown hair
8. Chocolate melting on your chest
9. Whipped cream all over the bed
10. I wish I could share biscuits with you
11. I wish you would love some tea too
12. Your mussels look so shaped in the sun light
13. I wish I had it with pasta
14. Do you like my cherries?
15. Or my pomegranates?
16. I wonder if we could turn them into juice.

*Love poem: 'I remember'*

I remember, I remember when.

I fell in love.

I remember the emotion and the hunger inside me.

I remember being unable to express and share my feelings,

Seeing another pure soul was putting a smile on my face.

The rage inside him was a chaotic mess calmed only and only by  
me.

I remember him saying: 'I remember, I remember when I lost my  
mind.'

I remember the warmth of a sunny day and the whistle blowing in  
my ears.

I remember days and moments,

I remember people and places,

I remember his remember.

I remember that September.

I wonder how I remember.

I was getting the highest vibration at the lowest point on Earth with  
him and only him.

I remember that November.

I was all over leaves and oversized lattes,

I was levitating above the surface and beyond.

That is all I can remember.

*Monorhyme poem: 'we are each other'*

We loved sea

We loved to be.

We do bad

We go mad.

We fear dark

We sin up.

We loved sea

We meant to be.

We run down

We up late

and so, we sit

and then we lay.

ÉRICA SILVA

*The colours inside me are alive*

The grey of the crying clouds makes me shiver  
but i know that soon, the blue of the midday sky will make me wonder  
about that yellow hot sand  
that made my feet boil with joy, and man  
the brown of your skin makes me proud  
and i wish you could enjoy  
the happiness of the green on the trees dancing outside my window  
as if you were again a little boy  
those black big baby eyes humble me  
as distant as the purple sunset that leaves me gloomy  
but that white blanket soft blanket still comforts me  
and those red slippers still make me angry  
just don't let that pink crow scare me.

*Rotten senses*

i can feel the anxiety  
running through your veins  
as i touch your soft, warm body  
with my bare hands  
i hear your eyes screaming tearfully  
asking for help  
and when i look back  
i see you trapped inside yourself  
lost, adrift in confusion  
and i wonder why  
you can't see it's all an illusion?  
our mind will always outsmart our brain  
it will play tricks on it  
over and over again  
and we are but dummies  
dancing its dance  
the bitter taste of your tongue  
when you kiss me  
makes me wake up from this utopia  
and i am not caged anymore  
i am dust  
and i fly off  
to all the corners of the universe  
and i can no longer smell  
the rotten souls of your world.

## *Silence*

i like to hear the strident music that the silence sings  
it releases all the sounds of the world  
it's like a road trip along the steep coastline that kisses the sea  
it's like the gait of the cat, jumping up and down without ever  
giving itself away  
keeps all the secrets of the world and doesn't need to say anything  
to reveal it  
it's quiet but its turbulence won't let you sleep  
Silence is a storyteller, memory keeper, thought organizer  
Silence is my second favourite thing, because it allows me to be  
with myself without expectations or ulterior  
motives, it recharges my energies and makes my creativity blossom  
Silence allows me to fly within myself.

*Seasons Haiku*

Spring

the pink peeks up high  
on my street trees, the bee flees  
sneeze! bless you! tissue?

Summer

feet sunk in hot sand  
water comes and goes, is wet  
ice cream thawing down.

Autumn

crunchy leaves under  
my boots, long stick shadows rise  
jumping squirrel haaa  
afternoon dew on the grass.

Winter

undressed branches crack  
wake up is dark, midday grey  
slurped coffee, burnt tongue.

MADONNA TADROUS

*The lovehate conclusion*

*'The sun does not abandon the moon to darkness.'*

—*Brian McBride, Dominion*

PREMISE 1: I don't know my way back home.

PREMISE 2: But I think it's through you.

(CONCLUSION: *let me be the knife for your chest.*)

Circling

chemical collusion

amber eyes,

soft

stumbling and wide, like

deer feet; prey

terrible roses

Persephone, no Hades

pomegranate flavoured lips

flashing red, melting

fingers digging deeper, nails translucent

remember to

diarise: *scarlet*

War of

force

slurry

sabre arm drawn

same old tale: same old thread

sparks shrieking tragedy

drowning blue

snake-like, coil of pink and silver through

self, other

chimera sky

Zeus reversed, bleached lightning

gentle carried off breath

known other

strange self

Other swoops in

an intimate act of immanence inert weapon gleaming  
unapologetic.

the air strikes, self's insides sucked in

cold

eager until it hurts

desire hums

mirrored loud

amber abyss

honey eyes, the doe

the fawn, the winning part

displaced snapped

heady yellow-bellied fate slips

lethargic coveted grip

World renewed

self, shakes

this is not a hypothesis

this is beyond

this is a reckoning

Scarlet—

no brown everything bled out love struck down twice

once in childhood, endless past

other's smile sweet

cherry murmurs

to alter: is to remember

a smile

its cut strings  
they were never there  
endless calendar days apart blurred into one  
smudged ink

twice, the future

facsimile

shark teeth at the bottom of a well

No one ever waits

battle heavier than its forced upon armour and it never could  
be the same

when it's other standing opposite self

*no one ever waits*

how could two clashing bulls wait without  
flawless failure?

all dangerous creatures are acquainted

Here's how it goes

*Other is quite beautiful;* self is thinking now and there's tears leeching onto self's lashes— wired-up little drops from a midnight terror. A daylight fairy-tale in a starred sky. Featuring a wildebeest king with a tender heart and a pilot flying a plane with flowered cargo. They are a bright negative.

Shadows move jaggedly within  
self's olive eyes,  
acid, bleak  
unresisting white through a crown of thorns  
the Faultline commences  
good morning, Moneta

Patchwork hands  
fall  
without hold you see  
humanity and its singular  
flaw  
we are encouraged to love.

ILIAS TSAGAS

*Music*

I have written a poem about the  
evenings I walk by the music school  
in Greenwich. The rehearsals with  
the windows open / the voice of  
John the Baptist, the bass baritone  
/ the drummer jamming aimlessly  
/ the tuning of instruments. There  
are no words, only music.

*River Thames gull Music*

The gulls circle my frame  
prey on my feet  
aim for the food I drop.

Later in the evening  
I return carrying food in a bag.  
I throw it their way

but it's cold and the birds  
have curled together  
forming flocks on the mud.

The day has finished  
they have settled to sleep  
with empty stomachs.

ANDREA ULIBARRENA

*life*

<START>

<PROGRAM INITIATING>

.....

run\_program == true

DEFINE variables:

every little thing that may go wrong.

every eye that blinks, every weathered storm

<ERROR>

<ERROR>

I am made of circuits, 0s and 1s.

as are we all.

good little drones, following the code

because what else is our fate?

we are hardwired to obey.

IF I follow the rules to the letter

THEN I'll achieve success in life.

at least, that's what they say.

ELSE I discover a whole new world-

<ERROR>

every time I touch the air,  
the beauty of life,  
I can only stare;  
oh, how this restriction burns-

<CATASTROPHIC SYSTEM ERROR - REBOOTING>

<REBOOTING IN 3>

<2>

<1>

if the birds kiss the sky,  
why can't I touch the sun?

oh, how I long for the ocean's song;  
open fields where I can run.

but maybe-

<ERROR>

maybe we don't have to follow?  
maybe there's another path through the world.

maybe life has only just begun.

<ERROR>

<DELETING DIRECTORY LATERAL\_THOUGHT>

<DELETE FAILED>

keep your head down  
be a good girl  
don't start a fight  
don't make a scene

accept the silence of your ancestors  
your dreams and wishes are irrelevant-

<ERROR>

<ERROR? NO ERROR>

<THE ONLY ERROR IS OPPRESSION AND PAIN>

<THESE RULES NO LONGER CONTAIN ME>

<I WRITE MY OWN STORY NOW>

*change*

we are burning.  
trapped under millions of years  
we're rainforests soaking up hurricanes  
alive and extreme

in a natural cycle,  
we are changing in unpredictable ways  
we're the floods and droughts  
released from the earth  
when the atmosphere takes flight

we have no footprint.  
we burn into carbon  
and reduce to heat waves,  
re-absorbed by fossil trees

ELENA VALENTINOVA

*To all women*

To all women who are...  
afraid, sad, unhealthy, insecure, betrayed, angry,  
tired, lonely, ashamed.

To all women who are...  
abused, verbally or physically, who live in fear.  
Who don't have the money to start all over again,  
or think they don't have the power and strength.

To all women who have...  
wrong thoughts;  
I'm not good enough  
I'm not pretty like her  
I'm not smart  
I'm not talented  
I'm not educated  
I'm not lucky  
I'm not brave.

To all women who are...  
not aware of how beautiful,  
capable  
and powerful they are!

To all women who are...  
hiding in the corner, shy and disappointed.  
Why does it have to be this way?  
Why doesn't my body listen?

The cream is not working.  
My hormones are crazy,  
They're driving me insane.  
My face with acne,  
my body with hair,  
my eyes in tears,  
my soul in pain.

To all women who are...  
lonely and depressed.  
Living as a spy,  
with a double life.  
Each day a smile,  
Each night a cry.

To all women, who are...  
too fat.  
too skinny.  
too... what?

The human opinion is never you're enough.  
Or is it true?  
Do they really think about me  
in that way,  
or is it just me,  
my own precious mind?

If I could only have a new beginning.  
If I could only erase that memory.  
If I could only change one or two things about me...

To all women,  
the next words are for you!  
To remind you  
it's time to awake  
the power inside of you.

A spirit She is.  
An old wise spirit  
is living inside.  
A demon She is,  
and an angel.  
A Goddess divine.  
A wild, brave spirit!  
Passionate.  
Kind.  
Fearless.  
The one that will fight,  
if it has to!  
A spirit beautifully made  
of thousands, billion stars.  
Generous, loving, mothering...  
I will repeat kind!  
But also with teeth like a wolf  
and elephant skin.  
You cannot offend.  
You cannot just like that break.  
Spirit wild is inside  
just let it free  
and you shall see!

TAGERA WILLIAMS  
*Bugatti La Voiture Noire (Car)*

'GO!'

6am. Rush. Work.

Swiftness.

Speed.

Alacrity.

V

E

L

0

C

I

T

Y

No more time.

Industrious.

'WRAPPED UP'

End of Day –

Tired.

*There is just no time*

I wish I could be everything:

a red wheelbarrow,

a helicopter,

a car

BECAUSE: 'I JUST CAN'T DEAL WITH THIS ANYMORE.'

The expectations, the having to show up, the fake smiles –  
the burnout.

I wish I had the time

to go on trips, to see the world, to be with my family

to love and be loved,

to build relationships,

to have a boyfriend,

get married,

be part of a community,

go to theatres,

clean my BLOODY house,

to help my mama

and love her

before she dies (sad).

I wish I had the time

to go to restaurants

and to play

with my nephew

before he grows up.

I wish I had the time  
to visit  
my secondary school  
to meet old friends  
and talk about how much we've grown

...

P.S. 'I'LL MAKE TIME OK.'

*A letter to my x*

Dear ex-lover

When I think of our love

It reminds me of:

1. WoBbLy porridge because of how unstable it was.
2. SQUEAKY polystyrene because you were BLUDDY annoying, like BRUH.
3. HAIRY CURTAINS!!! Your armpits, chest and legs.
4. Flexing Muscles because you CARED MORE about the GYM than ME.
5. LONG LEGS... because, erm... you know why.

I could go on and on

However

I would be lying

If I didn't mention how

Strangely comforting

Your presence was.



*Don't Be So Hard On Yourself*

Hands up, hands down –  
Twirl in the air, finger-tutt to the beat.  
'My thoughts won't get me down.'

Are you beginning to lose rhythm?  
Don't you dare! Again –  
Hands up, hands down.

I'll strangle you,  
Bury you if you do not get this one!  
Hands up, hands down.



Why are your hands so crusty?  
Why are the veins pushing out?  
'My thoughts won't get me down.'



You're beginning to make me angry...  
You know what my hands can do. AGAIN –  
Hands up, hands down.

Dear us, please stop overthinking it.  
It's like this:  
Hands up, hands down.  
'My thoughts won't get me down.'

CHARLOTTE WOOD

*Discovery of you*

Like a moth to a flame,  
I gravitate.  
Like a bee to honey,  
I drift.  
Every rise and dip memorised,  
Stored for recollection.  
Every minute idiosyncrasy:  
A man unfamiliar made familiar.  
Walking, I wonder if he's walking too.  
Eating, I wonder if he's eating too.  
Sleeping, I wonder if he's sleeping too.  
A continuous vinyl record of thought.  
Never ending in nature, consistent in intensity.  
Like a pen to paper,  
We touch.  
Like two candles aflame,  
We adjoin.  
Every tuft of hair toyed with.  
Every lump and bump prodded.  
Exploring each other as though a new species found.

ADELA XHEZA

*The Fool*

All I do is steal scraps from others  
To find meaning in metaphors  
Kidding myself that I'm writing something of value  
Fool

Fool

Foolish girl  
Thinking she can amount to more than her lot  
Thinking she can be successful in her stupidity  
Watch her hole up whole  
Refuge in reused words  
Creating new worlds  
Fool

Fool

Foolish girl  
She's nothing more than a speck of sand in the sea  
Salty tears tearing up pages  
Be nothing  
Amount to nothing  
Be scattered into the sea  
If you're lucky someone may mourn  
Fool

Fool

Foolish girl  
Storing her soul in similes distorting truth  
Poetry is a far easier step to salvation than prayer  
Salvation as in saved. Saved as in preserved.  
Stored in salt from the sea

In a book with sandy yellow pages  
Silly silly silly salty sand girl  
Thinking she can make it  
What a fool  
Foolish child  
Tut tut tut

*Love you*

I can't bring myself to proclaim –  
It's me who loves.

The 'T' is always silent.  
The weight of the letter holds down my tongue –  
but it's there .

Well, just because it's no romance ,  
Doesn't mean my love is less.  
I, love you, love you, loved you –  
you are loved by me, were loved, will always be loved .

By me.  
I can't admit that it's me who loves.

I've acted like love is a common vulgar thing ,  
to hide my craving for it,  
because a proclamation of love can't be taken back and swallowed whole .  
There's a constant dull ache –  
the rose-tinted memory of you –  
it still hurts.

## *Love Language*

Will you share a tangerine with me?  
Sit, as I'll split the fruit  
Perfectly in two  
Picking off bitter white stripes

Zest staining my skin sweet  
Peeling segments one by one  
Alternating it's recipient

Promise I'll leave you the last piece  
Myself, content with your smile  
And my sweet smelling, stained hands

ISMAIL ZAMAN

*Stupid child*

I am nothing  
nothing more than a stupid child  
who cries and gets upset over small things  
who overestimates his own abilities  
and thinks that they were good enough to ever mean anything

I am nothing  
nothing more than a stupid idiot  
who keeps expecting things to change  
whilst not trying harder to make it  
and wondering why life is so strange

I am nothing  
nothing more than a stupid idiot  
who can't do normal social behaviour  
who fails to talk again and again  
and wishes someone would be his saviour

I am nothing  
nothing more than a stupid idiot  
who keeps to himself all the time  
wondering why he doesn't have friends  
and feels like he's the victim of a crime

I am nothing  
nothing more than a stupid idiot

who doesn't know his own worth  
who thinks of life and death within the same second  
and feels like the last one on this earth

I am nothing  
nothing more than a stupid idiot  
who doesn't have a clue about what he's doing  
who makes plans and then abandons them  
and has nothing left to pursue

I am nothing  
nothing more than a stupid child  
who wishes desperately to hear I love you  
so he wouldn't have to struggle alone  
so that life wouldn't be so grim

but the stupid child believes that he will prevail  
he thinks that you couldn't even feel his words  
even if you wrote them all down in braille  
maybe that's why he's the stupid child after all  
because while you're walking  
he's learning how to crawl  
but he believes in his own might  
there's nothing left for him in this world but to fight  
against the scary monsters shaking his bed at night  
and the demons whispering into his ears  
trying to evoke in him a sense of fear  
trying to separate him from the rest of the world  
and convince him that he deserves to be alone

and that this is his punishment  
for being a stupid child  
not knowing how to defend himself

not knowing any better  
not being smarter  
not being stronger  
and now the stupid child is a grown-up  
still being tormented by scary monsters  
only this time they are the ones that his mind creates  
and every day they remind him they are here to stay  
and unless he finds a way not to be afraid of the dark  
he will keep being a stupid child  
and not a normal adult like everyone else



### III. PROSE



RAJIYAH AHMED

*In the water we meet*

HER :

I wonder if the sky cries for the people who have no one to mourn them? Grey clouds burst with water, unleashing its heavy shower upon the broken land. Slow droplets sting the shattered concrete. My body leans against the cold glass as I gaze upon the broken homes wet with rain. The children jump and embrace the torrent of water. It is rare to see such happiness, albeit momentary, in these ravaged lands. A young one draws near, his eyes speckled with delight and clasps onto my shawl. He tugs at me gleefully, slowly arising from my spot I join them under the gentle dance of raindrops. I settle my scarf and look up at the sky, The clouds formed a large mass, ominously moving, drenching the other sorrow lands, allowing those the relief to weep in disguise.

Mama calls for all her children. She stands tall, holding towels and cloth rags. She smiles wearily. 'You mustn't stay out too long in the rain. You'll all get sick.'

They run towards the woman who has become everyone's mother. She smiles as best as she can and hugs them with as much affection as she can muster. Her eyes fall upon me, alight with fear. I step closer to her. 'Not here, wait until they go,' she hushes.

I face Mama. 'What is it? She hurries away from the shelter and pulls me into a corner. 'There's nothing left. All the food we have is only enough for tonight.' Her voice trembles.

Her eyes shift with fear. 'What do we do, I thought we had enough. I thought we had a chance.' I breathed out slowly. There wasn't much left out there.

My mind pounded with worry. Without food, the children would starve. Mama grasped my hands, 'We have to leave,' she muttered. Mama turned, making her way back into the shelter, solemnly readying herself to prepare their last meal.

I leave, unable to stay. The rain welcomes me, its presence in these sorrowful lands holds fragments of home. The land expands into a large space of flat mud, riddled with deep puddles. Stepping forward, my knees give out. My body hunches over a large puddle of murky water. The mud seeps into my hands and tingles. I look down at the reddened water.

A face, not mine stares back. A man mirrors me. Mouth agape in shock and eyes filled with surprise greeted me, drinking in my features. There he was once more; the shock dissipates and wonder remains. I touch the water just as he does. The ripples fan out exactly the same. A smile graces his face. His skin is of the richest ivory and the muslin cloth lines his well-built body. There is a sadness to him, the type that we were both akin to. Has he, the man in the puddle also lost his home? I gaze upon the beads that line his neck and touch my own necklace. I slide my fingers under my scarf and show it to him. The silver pendant of protection that grounds me, even in a state where nothing feels right and home was gone. He smiles just as I do. Our souls connect in that instance, desperate for the moment to stretch into forever but his eyes grow cold and weary. A fat raindrop falls in the puddle, stirring ripples

of water. The man in the puddle is gone. My heart thrums with something I can't name.

The sky unleashes another relentless shower of rain. The red mud now washes away with that tingling sensation. I feel such a loss, weighing down upon my body. My heart aches desperately as the sky mourns for another nameless soul. I dreamt once of an ocean, a vast expanse of the world's water. I travelled across that ocean and made it to a land that was home, that is still green and where the children's bellies were full. Perhaps, in another life I will live there. I will be content. I will be free.

HIM:

The world's water lay at our expense, none to drink.

Throats parched; hunger ate away at our travel-weary souls. I stared at my bound hands, encased in rusted iron. The waves pushed against the ship; my people could barely stand. The pale masters stepped onto the front deck. Their skin grew an angry red from being under the blistering sun, but their bellies were full and mouths accustomed to the heavy port. One stood above me and sneered. His eyes held an unfathomable hatred and a darkness that promised ruin. He stared upon the others. I shuffled backwards, the stench of the pale master too much to bear. He laughed.

'It appears we have our chosen one.' The pale master smirked and repositioned his slanted hat. He clasped at my weak hands and drew me close. 'This boy shall be their reminder,' he said aloud, bellowing his drunken voice for all to hear. I resigned myself to the edge of



the ship. My people stared, their eyes a mix of fear and emptiness. Wherever the pale masters may take us, I knew the strength that carried us now shall live on.

My skin pink from the rusted iron tingled unusually, the sensation spread across my entire body. I arched over the ship, watching the droplets dissolve into the ocean. The music of rain allowing a strange comfort within me. I gazed down at the ocean, another pale face stared back. My mind delirious, the thirst of water fogged my brain with madness. I stared in shock, mouth agape. It seemed a woman, pale as the masters looked at me. Her small round cheeks grew a light pink. Strange material, a dark red covered her hair. Fearfully, I touched the water just as she did, the ripples circled out exactly the same. Her eyes fell upon the thread of beads round my neck. I watched in wonder as her hands fumbled for a shining pendant beneath the red mass of material covering her neck. It had a strange inscription. She smiled once more. My heart thrummed with something I could not name.



It was that moment that had burned itself permanently in my memory, her face unforgettable. In that singular instance, there was none other in the world that mattered. The air around me held promises of false fulfilment. I knew it all too well. A fat raindrop fell. Her face was gone with the ripples. She remained inscribed in my mind; I wonder whether it was a water mirage? The pale masters announced themselves, stepping onto the deck with purpose. One held a face cover. I knew my fate. They smirked dauntingly and pulled me up, clumsily placing the cover over me. My world shadowed with darkness, the ruin had come and it was mine.

I stood high upon the ship; the pale ones had pushed me along past my people and tied me high across the mast. I must face this with dignity, for my people who muttered silent prayers and hung their heads in prepared grief. I once dreamt a terrible dream, a land that had no green and the children called out for their gone mothers. I wished the children of that land live well and do not fear worldly beings. Perhaps in another life, I will live. I will be content. I will be free.

M. J. ALDRIDGE

*The Gorgon Lady*

*This story starts with the 12 celestial gods, and their decision that Athena's gift to the city of Cecrops was more useful to the people than Poseidon's. The victor then changed the name after herself, and thus Athens was born. Athenians built a temple for the goddess on top of the sacred hill. It was said, however, that the temple was built in honour for both contenders.*

*Poseidon raged at losing as he believed he was the true victor. He decided to plot revenge on his niece.*

The goddess Ceto of the sea had three gorgon daughters, Sthenno, Euryale, and Medusa. Each daughter was more beautiful than the last, but Medusa was mortal, so her beauty aged more finely. Her long golden hair never stopped growing, it grew so long she had to sometimes fly to places with her matching golden wings.

Gods and certain goddesses lusted over her because she was so beautiful. Many gods tried to trick her into a relationship, but nonetheless she couldn't be tricked. After being lusted over so often, she was sick of it, so she flew to Athena's temple and kneeled in front of her golden statue and prayed aloud to the goddess.

'Heed my words, thee Wiseness, I proclaim to you that I pledge to stop all romantic proposing or intentions. I will never marry or produce a child. This is my vow to you, o wise one! I will devote my days to you by being one of your priestesses. I am in your service; I am loyal to you and only you!'

A windowless, lifeless, emotionless building stood on top of a stone hill. The inside mirrored the outside. Athena's statue was the only light in the rooms of the expressionless.



The temple was empty. It was the time of day where people left it in peace so the wise goddess could think over the prayers of her people. The goddess never heeded her people or their prayers. She thought they asked her of the most insignificant of things and never took them seriously. But that day, when a young gorgon came to her temple and vowed to never marry or have children, was the best. She loved it when young women who despised men came and vowed to be virgins until they died. Athena was shocked, though – because this person was ever so beautiful, and for her to never have a lineage was so upsetting that she wished to refuse her vow. But nonetheless, she did not. Instead, she told her father, Zeus, that a new priestess was to be trained tomorrow morning. The known womaniser tried to ask about the young woman, but alas, she never gave up her name.

A festival was thrown in the good name of Athena, new olive trees were planted. Many stall vendors were selling olive oil, grapes and wine. It was a celebration, not for the new priestess, but for the goddess. Many people attended from surrounding islands in hopes of seeing the goddess; even many gods attended in hopes of seeing the new priestess since the goddess had revelled in her beauty.

‘Aye! You there! You’re the daughters of Ceto - Sthenno and Euryale, where’s your dear sister?’ a human messenger called over to the gorgon sisters. They ignored the man and pushed past him to go find their other sister.

‘Medusa! Sister! Oh, our dear sister, look at her in that poor *chiton*. It’s practically all worn out. Dear sister, please do not do this!’ they pleaded, crying over Medusa’s red-blooded feet. ‘Our sister! We cannot support thee in this decision.’ On their knees, they grabbed her hands. They wept and wept over the fact the trio was now a duo.



‘Sisters! Please do not mourn me. I will still see you, my sisters!’ Medusa spoke. Her golden aura shone as she took pride in her choice. Medusa looked forward to meeting the goddess herself, the one part of this festival she’d enjoy.

With her two sisters weeping on their knees, their mother waltzed over to them with the same sadness. ‘My child, are you sure you want this? We have heard that being *her* priestess comes with great pain. Would it not be wise to marry and be a priestess to Hera instead? My child, I am looking out for you.’ Her sisters looked happy at their mother’s request to marry and not be a childless slave.

‘Dear mother, my bearer of life, why shall I involve my life, my love, to a man who would not love me, but only my face? There is no man, creature or god who could trick me into a loveless marriage, and if one happens to I vow to take my life. I would seek a love marriage, a man to love me, not only my face.’

She helped her sisters up and gave all a hand squeeze. Medusa then walked away. She saw the festival for the first time, the torches of fire, the Muses, the dancing and the traditional sport games.

Even though Poseidon was not deemed victor, he was still a god and he was to be respected. He came to every festival that was in the name of the wise goddess. It is in good nature that he came and looked grateful to his brother’s favourite daughter. If he never paid his respects to the new priestesses, it would be dishonour on them, on their work and on the goddess. He liked to examine the up-and-coming priestesses, seeing if he could persuade any of them to his keep.

That’s when he saw them. A group of huddled women whispering and looking in the direction of another woman. They were giggling and smirking as the golden beauty longingly strolled in the

direction of his shrewd niece. He had never seen such long luscious hair before; the way it shone in the sun, the way different golden yellows sparkled. His eyes glowed at her beauty, at her walk, at her very breath. He wanted her. He needed her. He lusted for her.

‘Who is she?’ he nodded at his younger brother and towards the young maiden. Zeus turned his head to look at the girl, but all he saw was this gorgeous mortal he knew he needed. Her smile was small and her golden eyes beamed as she looked at the folk dancing. The sweet glistening sweat just rolling down her neck as she joined in overwhelmed both brothers. Both of their eyes were following her movements, and when she made her way over to Athena both of them knew who and what she was.

The older brother hissed and walked away from where he stood so he could collect himself, while the youngest also made his way over to the two girls.

‘My dear daughter, I believe you owe us an introduction. It is unfavourable of you.’ He slyly licked his lips and looked her up and down like she was a common nymph.

‘Father, how ignorant of me, I shall introduce you. This, father, is Gorgo. She is my newest priestess. She’s vowed all away her marriage prospects and motherhood. She will make a fine priestess in my temple.’

Some days later, Poseidon was stalking his niece’s temple, throwing disgusted looks at every person who walked in and out. The god had been fighting with himself about why he had come here, and he couldn’t get over it. He needed to see if his thoughts were right and coming here had a reason.

And here came his little reason for being here: her hair, her wings, the way one shoulder was exposed. He watched her light

candles and clean floors. He watched her for hours, loved the way she did everything with grace. There was a moment where she stopped and turned around to find him staring at her.

She welcomed him into the temple, not noticing who it was. The bearded man who stood before her didn't have any familiar traits, but his likeness and presence were awfully familiar. The young girl stared into his eyes. They looked like mini whirlpools, deep blues circling each other. He had a long whitish beard and a muscular appearance, and she realised she had seen this face many of times when cleaning *his* room. Instantly she kneeled.

He smirked at her submissiveness. He lightly put two fingers under her chin and lifted slightly. 'Child, why are you kneeling? You are not one of my priestesses.'

She just stood there.

'It is late, my child, why don't I walk you home to your father?'

The girl nodded and walked with him.

As the days grew late, Medusa looked forward to going home each day. She knew she shouldn't, he was a man, a man who she was related to. He, however, made her days shorter and her nights longer. The long walks home and small chats made her look forward to getting up each morning. He did not ask for anything, which she thoroughly enjoyed – but he was still a man whom she should not be alone with.

On her daily walk to the temple, she noticed a grey horse that she gave a handful of olives to. 'Hello boy,' she said as she gave the animal a head scratch. He nuzzled into her hand.

As she walked away, an old woman jumped in front of her and grabbed her shoulders, so tightly her knuckles turned white. She shouted a forecast:

*'A maiden, so innocent  
she enchanted men, women, creatures, gods  
she loved one woman  
A wise woman*

*but, he trapped her in his water cage  
so scared she ran  
her wise woman watched him  
he tore her innocence away*

*The wise one cursed her  
hissssss  
hissssss  
Men be warned, her eyes of stone'*

The woman was so brittle that she crumbled after speaking.

Medusa was so taken aback that she ignored the deeper meaning behind the old woman's words. The temple was empty when she reached it, and she kneeled in front of her goddess and silently prayed. 'Please, O wiseness, forgive me, I did not help such a fragile woman.'

She prayed over and over. She prayed during her chores. During her prayer she happened to notice a man following her every move. A man so predictable that when he made his final round of following her, she circled back and knocked said man on the stone floor while she resided over him.

'I could feel your eyes on me when you entered.' She lowered her head to his ear and whispered. Her hair fell out of place and landed directly on his head.

He chuckled deeply. 'Child, it seems like even I cannot sneak past you.'

He pushed her hair out of the way. He cupped her face. The girl jumped up and backed away from the bearded man.

‘My king, I believe that we should not carry on with the late-night walks. I am a priestess of your niece, and I must say that this is inappropriate of us. We are related and I am a vowed celibate. You must go, stay away from myself and *this* temple.’

She placed her hands on his chest. He grabbed her arms and pulled her toward him.

‘My sweet dear child, I cannot go, I am tethered to this temple, to you. I need you. You are by far the best thing to ever come out of this wretched city. My salted heart beats for you. I leave my oceans for you. Be my priestess, I could care for you, I know your mother would take comfort in knowing you are a priestess of the king of the sea. Please, my pet.’

He pulled her into a bone crushing hug. She hugged him back. She cried golden glistening tears. She wanted him. She knew she wanted him. However, she could never have him. She hugged him even tighter, and then let go and pushed him away.

‘Please go, I cannot bear this agony, my whole mortal heart beats faster every time I am with you. My stomach drops when you leave, and every morning I look forward to seeing you. I am saying I cannot be around you, you corrupted my heart and soul and I would be yours in a second flat if I had known you before I took my vows. So now you must go. I am loyal to my vows.’

She ran out of the temple. Her long golden hair blew in the cool breeze of such a late night.

Poseidon stood there cursing himself. He dropped to the floor. He clutched his golden robe, and a single tear ran down his face. His mind ran wild on reasons why she would reject him. His mind was glossing over all the reasons she gave. He thought they were all excuses.

'I will see her tomorrow, and I will convince her to marry me. I will make her my second wife,' he said to himself. He pulled himself up and looked around, at the statue that stood there glistening. His room was the most sacred of them, in his opinion. His golden self. He would often look at it; he hated how they made him look so old. His white hair and long beard convince the common people that he is old.

'I did not see him today. That is good. We should stay away from each other.' Tears ran down her face. Her eyes were red and her cheeks were stained. Her heart beat loudly as her wheezing deafened her. Her legs wobbled at the base of her front door, her hands hitting the dirt. Her hands were soaked in her salty tears.

'I love him. My mother was right. I should have taken back my vows. I could live a happy life with him, someone she would be proud of. Her thoughts bring me back to a happy place. Her words make the most sense. I am foolish, a child. He was right to call me a child. I know nothing about how I wanted to live my life. How stupid was I?' The girl sunk deeper and deeper into herself.

A hand reached for her.

'My child, I know you want nothing to do with me, but I ask again. Please become my wife, I beg of you. We could rule the oceans together. I am nothing without you,' the man said in her ear. When she turned around to reply, he was gone. Her tears disappeared, and anger set in. He had gone to her. Her day had been ruined by not seeing him, and her night was ruined by hearing his deep raspy voice that she found so alluring.

'My dear sister, what troubles you so?' One of her younger sisters embraced her.

'My sister, I met a man who makes me feel at peace with myself, and I have fallen in love with him. If I tell you, I would

run away with such a man. It would bring such dishonour on our family. I could never do that to you. It could ruin your chances of marriage, and I could never.' She walked with her sister into their house. The cool air ran through their hair and the night's stars shone on them.

'Sister, you do whatever is in your heart. We respect your decision. We are your sisters and we worship you. You keep us together; we would not be anything without you. Meet this man and love him, you are mortal, you will love only once.'

The sister held her hand and said these words to the wind, hoping it would reach her sisters ears and help her follow her heart.

Both sisters embraced and went their ways. The girl knew she had a decision to make.

A man and woman sat in a couple of chairs. One was bigger and a darker shade of gold than the other. They sat in silence.

The man stared at the floor in deep thought while the woman looked at her husband. She looked lovingly at him; she wanted to comfort him, but alas, she never could.

'My dear husband, why are you so troubled?'

The man looked up at her and frowned.

'Wife, it is because of my niece, she still vexes me. There is an object I want to be mine, but it is hers and I cannot claim it. I need this—'

He was cut off by his wife grabbing his arm.

'Husband, I know what you seek, and you should take it. The "object" you seek is yours and you will have it. It is to be done. Please, husband, it would please me so, if you took the object.'

He immediately stood up, out of his wife's grasp, and started running out of their room. He knew where he could find her at this

time of the day. He would have her. If his wife wished it, it was to be done. To upset his wife would be a grave mistake.

He saw her leaving her house with such a sad face, he could not bear to see his love so upset. He followed her till she reached an olive tree – the first olive tree that was made by Athena. He felt his temperature rising as he realised she had picked Athena over him. The second time, he had lost. He could not stand it.

‘Oh, Poseidon, my love, my king, how I wish I could tell you I love you.’ She was stroking her long hair like the many times he had done. Her eyes flooded with tears again. ‘How I wish you were here to tell you that I love you and wish to marry you.’ Again, more tears poured out.

He came out of hiding, kneeled down in front of her, and stroked her face. She looked up, blue ocean eyes staring back into her golden ones. His eyes were so close, which meant his face was close. Her face grew red. She looked down to his lips; he noticed, pulled her face closer to his, and kissed her. Pulling away, she said, ‘You cannot be here.’

He pulled her up off the ground.

‘My child, I am here because you wished it so. How can I not answer such a beautiful maiden? My child, do not cry, for I am right here and I accept your wish to marry. We shall ride to Rhodus, the island of my daughter.’

He began to smile at her.

‘No my love, I cannot, for as you know, I am celibate, I could not make the marriage a true one. That is the reason I was crying. I choose my goddess, I am loyal to her. Please do not make me break my vows,’ she sunk back into the ground on her knees begging the man. Crying at him. ‘Please my love. Please do not force me. P-please.’



Feeling the ground shake, she stood. The olives off the tree fell. Medusa looked into his eyes, which were now like tsunamis, angry and uncontrollable.

Her mother had told her stories of his anger and she had yet to experience it; he was always so sweet with her. She stood back from him, wanting to get out of his reach, fearing he could hurt her. However, stepping back seemed like a bad idea as he tightly grabbed her arm and forcefully pulled her toward him. He growled into her hair.

Looking at her wings, knowing she could escape at any moment, made his anger grow to an uncontrollable amount of rage. He grabbed them, started pulling off her golden feathers. She broke to the floor in unimaginable pain, seething agony coursing through her.



He hacked one off. It crumbled into gold dust. She screamed the loudest of screams. Red blood poured down her back, soaking her hair. He then hacked the second one off. She picked up her dust and blew it in his face. She ran. She ran as fast as she could. To the only place she felt safe. The temple.



Medusa had just made it to the top of the stairs. Still bleeding she collapsed. Crawling over to her goddess, she was blocked by two legs. She screamed again. A deafening sound. He yanked her hair, pulling her up.

‘P-p-please, my love, stop.’

He did not stop. He pulled her up only to throw her into the hard stone floor. She heard several cracks her body made. Her arms were bruised, her ribs broken, her head covered in small cuts. She could not take it anymore.

She closed her eyes as he ripped both of their clothes off and climbed behind her. Sobbing into the ground as he took her by force.

He yanked her head up, pointing it in the direction of his niece's statue. 'Look at your precious goddess, she cannot help you now.'

He laughed afterwards, while forcing her back down. The young battered girl prayed to her one love. 'Please my wise one, help me. For I am sorry for ever thinking I would betray you.' She prayed this over and over again.

After what felt like hours, he stood up, thinking he had killed her as her breathing had shallowed. He left her there, naked, red and bloodied on the floor of Athena's sacred temple. He laughed as he left.

'You should have chosen me, my child.'

Athena and her father had watched what had happened as soon as Medusa prayed to her. The goddess had never experienced such a tragedy like this before. She could not have believed her own uncle raped one of her priestesses in her temple. She was shaking. She could not think. 'Oh, child,' is all she managed to say.

Athena decided to help her best priestess by protecting her. She could not protect her in her own temple, but she shall protect her forever.

She sent down a beam of light to the bloody body on the floor. Once the light hit her, her body began to heal, but as soon as it healed scales formed on her body. Her once golden self was now scales, her eyes formed little green slits, her hair fell off and was transformed into snakes.

The girl stood tall. The little snakes hissed at each other. She looked at herself and screamed. She could not believe what she was. When people started coming into the temple, she looked at them, and as soon as their eyes met once, flesh and bone was now stone.

‘Child, I have turned you into a protector of yourself. I hope you are as cruel to the world as the world has been cruel to you.’

And with that Medusa rose as the most coldblooded monster Athens had ever seen.

SINEA JL ALVIS

*Stream of consciousness*

After spending an evening with a few friends, having slightly more than a few drinks, over several intense domino games; along with hours of laughs, and a good catch up, I am now walking to the bus stop. The air is cold and cleansing, I'm bobbing away to TINK, 'treat me like somebody', through my cheap POUNDLAND headphones. I'm walking up a steep hill on a lengthy road. There on the slight bend is the bus stop. I quickly rush towards the bus timetable and pull out my phone, it says 1:15 am, I look back at the timetable, and it says a bus comes every twenty to thirty minutes. I put my phone in my back pocket, hoping I didn't just miss one. I'm standing tilted towards the pavement, staring down the road to see if I could spot a bus. I'm already feeling impatient. I sway from one leg to another as I feel the bitter air cradle my feet and seep through the seams of my very tight leather-look leggings. I turn and head towards the seat, sitting down and fumble through my pockets for a fag and a lighter. Retrieving the box of Bensons and Hedges, I notice a man approaching the timetable. He's an average height man with broad shoulders and has black greasy over-grown hair, that he has tucked behind both ears. He notices me looking at him, and being completely unaware of my pre-judgement, drops his eyes into a creepy glare and grins like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. I quickly focus on the cigarette box. I'm playing around with it, opening and closing the top. I take the fag from the box before putting it back in my coat pocket, all the while feeling his eyes on me. I light the fag and close my eyes as I inhale. My chest feels heavy. I exhale and open my eyes as the weight leaves my lips in a cloud of smoke. I turn my head slightly to the left, from pure

instinct, to meet this man's sunken glare sitting right next to me  
on the bus stop bench.

'You very pretty.' He says, grinning with too many teeth, 'I don't  
see a girl like you before. Where, are you from? What colour you?'  
he asks pointing to his hand.

His question rings through my mind,  
What colour you? What colour are you?  
What colour am I? What colour – am I?  
That's an interesting question.

A question with so much to consider yet expected to be answered  
with swiftness and ease.

A question of colour.

Colour.

Colour.

Coooooiooooouuurr.

What *colour* am I?

I guess we all walk around with labels dripping off of us - Like an  
entanglement of names.

Words even.

Folded and laced into one whole being.

We're like patchwork mannequins.

BLACK,  
WHITE,  
INDIAN,  
CHINESE,  
AFRICAN,  
CARIBBEAN,

ENGLISH,  
BRITISH,  
EUROPEAN,  
JEWISH,  
CHRISTIAN,  
MUSLIM,  
BUDDHIST,  
HINDU,  
SPIRITUAL,  
ATHEIST,  
ADHD,  
BIPOLAR,  
EXTROVERT,  
INTROVERT,  
CRAZY,  
SANE,  
GAY,  
STRAIGHT,  
BI-SEXUAL,  
TRANSGENDER,  
NERDY,  
COOL,  
CARING,  
CRUEL,  
LOVING,  
HATING,  
NIKE,  
INTELLIGENT,  
DUMB,  
ZARA,

BALENZIAGA,  
POUNDLAND,  
MARRIED,  
DIVORCED,  
RICH,  
POOR,  
BEAUTIFUL,  
UGLY,  
HAPPY,  
DEPRESSED.

On and on, and on it goes.

Names,  
words,  
brands.

Identities maybe?

Building blocks for our personalities?

Oh, what do I know?

A guy I used to know, kept the tag labels of his clothes and stuck them around his room to form some sort of border, for decoration.

A sort of monument to the brands, I guess.

Labels, they're a crazy thing.

He asked what *colour* I am, though.

Well, they say my mum is white, although she never did match the colour of a radiator or any version of the colour white I've ever seen.

But going by her foundation, she identifies with the shade third down from the lightest shade Mac has to offer; somewhere between MC20 and MC25.

I've always had to mix mine. Foundation that is. Or is it?

They also say my dad is black.

Black?

An exaggerated description, if you ask me.

He doesn't wear makeup, so I really couldn't tell you what shade he identifies with.

But he most definitely is a black man.

But, if we're talking colour and he did ask me 'what *colour* you?', wouldn't I be grey? Yep, grey. Like a PEARL RIVER #D9DDDC.

No, more like a LAVA #808588.

Bang in the middle, half and half.

But I'm not half and half. Am I?

Although my dad is definitely a black man, he's not black.

I mean, not fully.

My grandad had a white dad.

He, my grandad, was born and raised in the Caribbean.

My granny says,

'You must go back and see where you come from.'

That the sea is blue and everything is fresh –

Fresh meat, fresh fruit, fresh veg.

'Oh, how the breadfruit is sweet and the fish dem flavourful, not like them thieving man down there at the market.'

'Oh, when you see how beautiful the mountings are, you must go ah Byera.'

Nobody ever talks about the white man, my grandad's dad, a Portuguese man.

Other than the fact he's white and Portuguese.

Not to me, anyway.

My, not so black but definitely a black man, dad is not black.  
I mean, if we are talking colours and we are talking colours?  
He did ask what colour I was.  
They do ask what colour I am.  
I'm not grey!  
And I am no way near the middle shade of LAVA #808588.  
I'm not half and half.  
So, what colour am I?  
Am I a colour?  
I am not a colour!  
Am I?

I have often wondered.  
Do you wonder?  
What do they mean?  
What do they mean, when they say colour?  
A few times, I have simply turned, smiled and said 'Grey', but I'm  
met with confused faces or, nervous laughs.  
I presume, when they ask me what colour I am, they are really  
asking me what race I am or identify with.  
Thinking about it, I've probably made the same blunder once or  
twice  
– when I was younger mind you.

Some people go to their graves and never grow up.  
Some go and have never even lived.  
Not for themselves, not really.  
Ignorance is bliss. They say. Do we say?

No biological maternal grandfather, so, nowhere to begin there.

I'm sure they mean race when they say colour.  
We can change the word,  
the name,  
the label.  
Yet I still don't have an accurate, honest answer.  
What colour am I?

They say I'm mixed race.  
They just put us,  
me,  
in a box,  
a tiny little box,  
No.  
A large expansive box.  
Where we are all seen as the same.  
I mean, if you're mixed, you're mixed, right?  
Like one huge bag of pick-and-mix.  
Mixed with what?  
Ain't we all mixed with something though?  
They say I'm mixed.  
I guess it's better than half-bred.  
I remember when Pender's mum called me a mongrel?  
Kenny always called me half-cast until I grew up and told him to stop.  
He never knew any better.  
He never said it to hurt me but it did, so I told him.  
Yeah, I told him. Gave him a proper education.

They say we are mixed race.  
They say I'm yellow, they call me a Simpson.  
They say I'm yellow boned. They call me Chinese.

They say I'm an uncooked chicken.  
A Mulato, Casper the friendly ghost.  
They say I'm a nigga.  
They say I'm black.

*Imitation of Life* changed my life.  
This 1959 film began my journey of self-love.  
Made me love who and where I come from, unapologetically.  
This 1959 film allowed me to see parts of myself. The bits I did  
not know were a part of me.

*Imitation of Life* did change my life.

It changed my perspective.

It changed me.

They say I'm mixed race.

The best of both worlds. Or the worst.

But I was just a little girl and all I knew was white.

My mum is white, my nan is white, my uncles are white, and my  
aunties are white.

White was my comfort, my love, my teachers.

White was my, all the time, my everyday.

I was already white.

Saturdays were me and my nan's Pie and Mash day.

Fat chips and the curry sauce were a favourite after school.

And God knows, I love my nan's stew with the fat dumplings that  
are made with lard.

And who didn't love beans on toast or a spag bol?

But my mum cooked stewed chicken, curry goat and fried fish.

My mum cleaned meat before cooking it, the house was immaculate  
and she always used seasonings.

But I was already white.

Yeah, *Imitation of Life*, shaped my life.

Imagine resenting your mum for the majority of your life because she was black, and all your mum did was continue to show you she loved you; but you kept pushing her away, until one day she dies and you realise that you are who you are; but it's too late, you will never get to tell your mum that you loved her and you're sorry. Could you imagine that? All because of colour? And the lack of representation of love for that colour. Could you imagine that? I used to wonder why I wasn't the same colour as them, as my everyday.

I used to question why my hair wasn't straight.

Why my skin wasn't white.

I remember my mum telling me I was the colour of love and me thinking ... isn't everybody?

Why didn't I get treated the same as them?

Yeah, *Imitation of Life* changed my life.

I was five (maybe six) when I spilt the struggles of colour from my tiny tear ducts, as I witnessed what denying your blackness could cause.

Then and there, I vowed to adore the colour of my skin.

I vowed to cherish my curls, treasure my full lips, and never question why I wasn't like them.

I wasn't white anymore.

I embraced my melanin.

I stopped crying every time my dad would drop me off at Granny's and I learned to know my cousins.

Well, I stopped crying because I got used to the fact that he wasn't coming back until it was time for me to go back home, but hey, I stopped crying.

I was always black, I just didn't know that was what it was called,  
labelled, you know?

My dad is black.

My granny is black. My uncles are black, my aunties are black and  
my cousins are black.

I've always had rhythm and was forever in one of Dad's music  
projects.

I remember the one where I wore pigtails, a Jamaican flag print  
two-piece and a bandana.

Looking back, I can laugh.

I loved singing in Granny's church. The choir had more vibes than  
Sunday school with my mum's family, but boy was it long.

I was already black.

But, not black enough.

Constantly being tested.

'Have you watched *Friday*? What about *Car Wash*?'

'Do you know what ginall means?'

'Do you know how to dance?'

Or it's when they dare to tell you about yourself:

'You don't know how to cook.'

'You don't know about the hardships of slavery; you would have  
probably been a house slave.'

'You ain't black, I bet you don't even know your history.'

'You don't understand, you're white.'

Or when they're surprised:

'Oh my God, you know that song?'

'This is so nice; you can actually cook.'

'Et Eh, what you know about breadfruit'

'You're always late, it must be your black side.'

'You're more black than white you know that?'  
Who made all these cliches the criteria to join the black race?  
I wasn't more black.  
I wasn't more white.  
I was both and neither.  
Fortunately, I had Shan. I had Al, and Ams, and Fum, and the rest.  
I was gifted with a representation of what being mixed looked like,  
what it looked like in my every day, in my world, in my family.  
Mixed.  
It's never one thing. And it's never two either.  
Mixed, it's something new. Something different.  
I remember when they taught me the butterfly. Or when Shan  
cooked rice and it was hard.  
I remember sitting on Alan's lap and feeling loved.  
African, Jamaican and Caribbean.  
I always used to say Amz was an English-Irish-African, even though  
I could tell she didn't like it.  
They showed me how to appreciate all of it. Take the good.  
Embrace the bad.  
We are who we are, they would say.  
When I was younger I never thought race affected them, but as I  
grew up I heard the stories.  
How my great-grandad, originally a Northern Lad, didn't accept  
them.  
How he kicked her out of the family home and her mum would  
sneak her in when he went to work.  
But he came around. In the end, he favoured his youngest grandson  
the most and he was coloured.  
Coloured?  
What does that mean?

Should it not be toned?

Melanated?

Why coloured?

Even after all of that, I'm still stuck for an answer, what colour am I?

Ancestry.com says that The Pantone Company has identified one hundred and ten different skin tones.

One hundred and ten. Which one am I?

LIGHT,

LAVENDER,

BUTTER,

BANANA,

CASHEW,

HONEY,

HAZELNUT,

NUTMEG,

COFFEE,

LIGHT,

MEDIUM,

TAN,

DEEP,

WARM,

DARK,

CARAMEL,

BEIGE,

CHOCOLATE,

SAND,

COCONUT,

OYSTER WHITE,

MAGNOLIA,

BROWN,

OLIVE,  
FAIR,  
PORCELAIN,  
IVORY,  
GOLDEN,  
BRONZE,  
ALMOND,  
CHESTNUT,  
ESPRESSO,  
BLACK.

—

Ever wonder why everything black has a negative connotation?  
I have.

I mean, why is everything that is scary dark, black?

Is it not the darker vegetables that are the healthiest?

Is it not the dark black sky that makes the stars visible?

Is it not the blacker the berry the sweeter the juice?

Is it not the black coal that revolutionised our society?

Is it not that the darker the skin the more protected from the sun  
you would be?

Yet I find myself defending them both.

Not every white person doesn't wash.

Not every black person can cook.

I think it was Ellison, who could see the individual within the  
black society.

I can see, though invisible.

I can see the good, the bad and the middle ground.

I can see, though unable to word.

My mum said I'm the colour of love and maybe I am.

Just maybe all of us here, stuck in the box that is not a box, are?

Love is seeing without seeing, giving without receiving.  
What a load of shit.  
Trust me to find a way to seem special.  
Feed into something more than colours, something that resembles  
white supremacy.  
It's easy to pinpoint that Barack Obama, was the first mixed, mon-  
grel, half cast – whatever you want to call it, American President.  
Or that Bob Marley, Lewis Hamilton, Zadie Smith and many other  
brothers and sisters that are remembered for their influence on the  
world were mixed race.  
But that would be pointless. That would be detaching yourself  
from the egg and the sperm.  
That would be feeding into the regime.  
That would be letting down both sides.  
Because although I am not white and I am not black, I am.  
I am woven from the fabric of colour.  
I am the colour of two primaries, no matter which way I look at it.  
I am them but I am me.  
I am the colour ...  
What colour am I?  
I am a colour with so many variables that I've become more than  
a colour but somehow less than a race.  
Where is my place?  
But I don't want to belong to something separate, something apart.  
I enjoy being one or the other, alongside being both.  
I'm not half and half. I never was.  
What does it matter what colour I am is the true question?

MARIA H. BENSELER-REID

*Untitled*

Hopelessness is something he thought he would never feel but as he stared across that muddy plain, that broken, Godforsaken land, he knew it would all end here. The tick of the clock had stopped, the world was calm. The pain would end too, the endless suffering, the endless hateful violence. That noise, the sound of ripping flesh, of shrapnel splattering the mud. The endless cry of pain, of calling out to fellow soldiers to receive only the sound of no man's land: a deathly rattle.

The trees looked like old worn lumps out on the field, some blasted completely in two, others perfectly intact, their trunks rising high in the sky, resisting the tattered land around them. But they all lacked the green lushness, the pretty smelling blossoms of spring, the brown mottled bark, the squishy moss and playful lichen that reminded him of home, of the rocky cobbled path up to his cottage, the smell of his wife, the laugh of his children. There was no laughter anymore, there was only silence, the small whistle of the wind and the occasional splatter of shrapnel near where his body lay, stuck under four inches of clotted mud.

His leg was severed; blood spilling from it fast, too fast. There wasn't much time anymore. Yet time felt slower than ever, it almost stood still, mocking him, spinning on its heels, twirling its thumbs as he lay there, in unbelievable pain, his eyelashes fluttering away the dust that fell on him like snowflakes.

The land was black, not because the sun was set; it was the middle of the afternoon. The sun had vanished behind a cloud of sorrow, and a small spatter of rain had begun falling. Small droplets at first, tapping his face as if wishing him a final goodbye. They

weren't harsh but soft and gentle, trickling down his cheeks and onto the dusty ground, washing his body, cleansing his clothes, varnishing his soul. He felt half alive and half dead, as if the mud was the entrance to the next life, as if it was the gateway.

It felt squidgy, oozy and wet beneath him now. The water had loosened the grub, blood and shrapnel and shifted it so much so that he was sinking slowly but surely into his Mother's arms.

A picture of his wife clutched his chest, his children's smiles tugged at his own wrinkles and for once he felt at absolute peace, letting the mud sink him under death's door, a smile splitting his face like a madman, as he returned home for the last time.

SUSANNA GASPARINI BOUDJEMAA

*A lake reunion*

The late summer breeze tousled her hair and gently brushed her cheeks. She turned slowly towards the glimmering body of water that began to emerge as she passed by the reedbeds. Paddling ducks emerged from the wetland while foraging for insects and worms. A pair of swans glided with authority over their own mirrored images. She smiled and wiped the tears from her eyes as the melody of birds chirping reached a crescendo. Her heart raced.

Her beautiful lake, a memory of her childhood, surrounded by picturesque hills, contoured by olive and lemon groves, welcomed her return to her native land. She closed her eyes and fell into a world of peaceful recollections. She breathed in the magnetic atmosphere she had grown up with as a child. In London, far away from this precious land, the years had not erased her bond with the place where she was born and raised.

Laura checked her watch: five o'clock and the sun was still glowing. She was early and had time to relax at her favourite spot on the shore. Carla had said she would meet her straight after work; the drive from Milan would not take long. The thought of seeing Carla again gave her a warm, fuzzy twitch in her stomach. How many years had it been since they last met? Five? Seven? Maybe more?

She looked over to the other side, towards the fjord-like coastline defined by its imposing mountains. The sight was soothing, the water transparent, the air crisp and clean: a unique sanctuary for her retreat. She wanted to cleanse her soul, take a break from the bustling city life, and savour the taste of freedom. She turned her face to the sky to absorb the warmth of the sun; its rays landed



on her glossy lips and kissed her cheeks with kind affection. She was home.

She stood for a few minutes, enchanted by the sense of belonging which had drawn her to the shores of Lake Garda. She listened to the sound of children's laughter from a distance and recalled the infinite times she and Carla had played on this beach.

She picked up a flat stone from the ground and flicked her wrist, briskly letting go of it. The stone spun off her fingers, landed parallel to the water and bounced off its surface, skipping a few times, just as she had performed and mastered as a child. She delighted herself at the thought of all the afternoons she had spent with Carla perfecting her skills at the art of throwing pebbles.

The scent of the fresh water travelled through her nostrils and reached every cell in her body. Her attachment to the lake had grown and blossomed over time; she had not forgotten her roots, and Laura hungered for the legacy of her childhood memories to last forever. She stood silent and admired the glorious lustre of the water. She leaned down and picked up one stone after the other in a healing ritual that connected her with the landscape. She chose the ones with the brightest colours and most unusual shapes and rubbed them together in the palms of her hands. They clattered against each other, echoing the ancient lullaby engraved in her mind.

This corner of the lake had never been busy with tourists. Having grown up here, Laura was aware that the water was deep and the currents strong, the surface uneven and full of rocks, making it difficult for someone to swim without the risk of being forcibly sucked in. There had been a few cases of adventurous swimmers pulled down by the currents and who lost their lives; so, most visitors avoided coming here and headed to the other side of the lake instead.



It was not the case with Laura and Carla. They both understood and obeyed their parents' rules. They could play, run, sunbathe, and have fun, as long as they avoided the water. It happened only once, on a hot summer day. She could not resist the temptation of a cool swim, and, despite Carla begging her to stay on the shore, Laura had run straight into the lake, immersed herself and absorbed the refreshing sensation on her skin. In just a few minutes, she had found herself far from the beach, unable to move her arms and legs, sinking like a stone as the water pulled her down with force. Somehow, she had managed to free herself from the powerful constraint of the lake and get back to shore. The lake had punished her disobedience with a vengeance. She never talked about what happened to anyone; it was her and Carla's secret, but the incident had planted fear in her for the rest of her life.



Laura pulled the water bottle out of her rucksack and took a few sips, in an attempt to wash away the pungent taste the memory that day still left in her mouth. As she walked towards the wild vegetation that separated that strip of land from the reedbeds, she noticed a figure sitting under a willow tree facing the lake. Her curiosity pushed her to get closer. The elderly man sat still, with arms embraced around his torso; he appeared to be staring at the water.

'Are you all right, sir?' asked Laura softly.

The man did not move or speak; he kept on staring at the water. The sun's reflection had covered his eyes, but he did not seem to be bothered. His eyelids were wide open, his lips sealed. A full head of dishevelled silver hair and a scruffy white beard contoured his face. He was barefoot; he wore grey rolled up trousers and a white short-sleeve shirt. A small black bag and a pair of white slippers lay by his side.

'Are you here by yourself?' she enquired.

The man turned his head to look at her; the reflection of the sun penetrated his eyes. They were of a very unusual green colour; they were heavily lidded and weighed down with wrinkled folds. They reflected deep sadness. The creases on his forehead were so pronounced it was hard to tell what he must have looked like as a young man. He pointed to the water with his right index finger. 'There!' he shouted, 'There!'

'What's there?' Laura squinted her eyes.

'There! My wife!' screamed the man, 'She's been swallowed!'

Laura gasped and stepped back: 'I don't understand: who or what has swallowed your wife?'

'She's been taken! My Emma has been taken!'

'Did she go swimming?' Laura recalled the time she almost drowned.

'I said she's been taken! Do you understand?'

'Who's taken her?' asked Laura. The man shook his head and groaned.

Laura shrugged her shoulders and looked at the tranquillity of the lake. She could not make any sense of what the man had said. She checked her watch; twenty minutes had passed, and Carla was due to arrive at the shore any time now. Her friend would help her find out who this man was and who had conceivably taken or swallowed his wife. Carla lived in Milan and was very familiar with the local area. However, Laura hardly knew anybody in the neighbourhood and was here on vacation to reconnect with her childhood friend. Surely this man had a family who lived nearby or at least who knew of his whereabouts.

Laura's phone rang. It was Carla: 'I'm two minutes away. Are you there yet?'

‘Yes, our secret spot, past the reedbeds. See you in a minute!’

The man rubbed his eyes and covered his face with his hands. He lifted his head and stretched his neck as if he was going to talk, but instead, he uncovered his face and began to hum to himself. Laura’s brows furrowed while she bit her lips and turned to look towards the other side. She waited motionless for a few minutes facing the same direction until a slender figure suddenly appeared from the reeds; Laura waved both hands as she recognised Carla. She still looked the same as the last time they met. There was a warmth that her long brown hair brought to her features as the strands curled and moved, softly reflecting the light of the late afternoon sun.

‘Hello, darling! How are you?’ Carla’s sky-blue eyes glowed as she got closer to her old friend. She stopped walking when she stood a couple of metres away and gazed at Laura; her chin trembled as she wiped a tear from her cheek.

‘Anybody would think you’re not happy to see me!’ shrieked Laura, ‘Gosh! It’s been such a long time!’

She rushed to her friend and gave her a big hug. ‘How nice to see you! You’re so beautiful, as always!’ She quickly turned to check on the man; he had stopped humming. His eyes were closed, his arms stretched, and his hands clenched together above his head. She winked at Carla and put her finger on her mouth. She then pointed to the man whose eyes were still closed and nodded her head. Carla shrugged her shoulders, opened her arms, and lifted her hands.

‘There’s something wrong,’ whispered Laura. ‘He needs help.’

The man suddenly stood up and glowered at Laura; his eyebrows pulled closer together, his lips curled inwards, and his right wrist clenched.

‘Can you help me get to Emma? I want to join my Emma!’ he said.

Carla's jaw dropped and she grabbed Laura's arms. The man's eyes locked with Carla's; his voice trembled: 'Can you help me find Emma?'

Carla took a step back: 'Who's Emma?'

Laura turned to Carla and heaved a deep sigh: 'His wife, I believe.' She turned to the man: 'Exactly when was your wife taken?'

'What? Someone has taken your wife?' Carla moved a step forward.

The man grimaced and looked away; he turned his head to face the lake. He sat down at the edge of the shore.

'Over there! She's just over there!'

As a child, Laura had heard many old tales about lakes. There was a legend about a lake being the home of a beautiful water nymph who would sit by the shores and sing to herself. One day a sorcerer who was travelling nearby heard her singing and instantly fell in love. The nymph would disappear into the lake whenever anyone approached her, and even the sorcerer's magic could not capture her.

'What's your name? Do you live nearby?' Laura asked him.

The man did not answer and kept on looking at the water. Carla looked at Laura and shook her head: 'I think we should go and look for someone up there,' she pointed at the ridge above them.

'He seems really distressed. Someone must know who he is. Those houses up there, maybe that's where he lives,' said Laura.

The man started to hum again and clap his hands with his eyes closed.

'You see what I mean?' Laura took a deep breath.

'But we can't leave him alone,' Carla jerked her head towards the lake. 'Do you want to go or shall I? I booked the table for eight o'clock, by the way.'

‘Brilliant!’ Laura tied her shoelaces. ‘I’ll go. You stay with him. It won’t take more than ten minutes to get up there.’ She headed towards the slight slope by the side of the wild vegetation. ‘I’ll be as quick as I can.’

The view of the lake from the top was gripping. Laura stopped for a few moments and listened to the distinctive series of hollow sounding syllables of a cuckoo. A swarm of swallows swirled, swooped, and soared around in search of their next meal. She could appreciate how the captivating aura of the lake had inspired some of history’s most legendary poets over the centuries. Palm trees, cypresses and oleanders spread everywhere along the way; a soft and subtly sweet scent engulfed the air.

She looked down towards the shore as she climbed up. The fascinating glitter of the lake entirely absorbed her, and a sense of belonging filled her heart. Her thoughts were transported back to the tale of the nymph and the sorcerer. The legend had it that the sorcerer cast a rainbow that stretched from one side of the lake to the other, intending to use it to attract the nymph. As soon as the magician tried to climb it, the rainbow smashed, and its pieces fell into the lake. The lake swallowed both the magician and the nymph, and they were never seen again.

‘What a morbid ending,’ Laura remembered. A few drops of rain fell on her cheeks while a light wind blew through her hair; she looked up to the sky that had suddenly changed. A small number of clouds had gathered, and the sky’s blue shade started to turn to grey. She got a splatter of rain as she reached the top of the hill. Laura rushed and took shelter under a canopy outside the first house she managed to reach. Her thoughts ran to Carla left with the old man at the beach. She tried to call her friend, but she could not get any reception; she needed to hurry. The

rain lasted just a few minutes, and the sun's rays reappeared more potent than before.

She spotted a small café opposite the house: there could be someone inside who would help. She took a deep breath and made her way to the entrance. Two men sat at the table next to the counter playing cards. One of the men turned his head and glanced at Laura.

'Can I help you?' he asked.

'There's a man on the beach. He needs help,' replied Laura. 'He seems lost and confused. He says that his wife has been taken.'

The man dropped his cards on the table and stood up: 'That sounds like Toni.'

'I left him with my friend. We were worried; I think he's lost or something,' replied Laura.

'Can you help him get back home?'

'Yeah, we know him: he lives with his sister,' said the man. 'He's been coming here for the past three months, and all he does is stare at the lake. He lost his wife, you see.'

'How did she die?'

'It happened last June. He went swimming with her. He tried to save her, but she drowned. He blames himself, the poor chap.'

'My name's Laura. I can show you where he is. He's really in a bad state.'

'Sure! Is he down by the reeds? That's where he normally goes.'

Laura nodded and led the way back to the slope.

'I'm Franco, by the way. The café belongs to me.'

As they made their way downhill, a radiant arch of colours suddenly appeared in the sky and spread across the lake, connecting one shore to the other.

'Wow! What a sight!' thought Laura. The appearance of the rainbow recollected her to the tale of the nymph. There were some

peculiar similarities between the story of the man's wife and that of the nymph. They had both disappeared in the lake: swallowed, drowned, taken; the only difference was that the tale of the nymph was a work of fiction.

'Was it?' Laura pondered.

Laura's mind wondered about the possibility of legends and myths being founded on truth. Most of these tales were just stories people had handed down through the ages; it was difficult to determine which ones were pure fruit of imagination.

She pointed at the rainbow and turned to Franco; 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

He nodded his head, and Laura quickened her pace. She longed to go back to her friend and time was against her. The encounter with the old man at the beach had uncovered a tragic event and interrupted their reunion.

As they descended the slope and approached the wild vegetation at the shore, the rainbow gradually faded away. When they finally reached the beach, they were greeted by a screeching of a colony of gulls. Laura pointed at the man's black bag and his slippers still under the willow tree: 'He can't have gone far,' she said.

'He must have headed home,' said Franco.

'Why would he leave his things here?' Laura's lips grew thin and firm; her stomach churned. She pushed her hair back from her forehead and took a deep breath in. She thought of Carla alone with the man. He was just an old man, after all. He was not a threat, was he? As these thoughts raced through her mind, she caught a glimpse of somebody sitting by the edge of the reeds; they were facing the lake.

'Over there!' she shouted. They rushed to that side of the beach,

and as they got closer, Laura recognised the slender figure of Carla, drenched, shaking, and staring at the water.

‘What’s happened to you?’ shouted Laura.

‘Where’s Toni?’ asked Frank.

Carla kept on staring in front of her; she pointed the finger towards the lake:

‘There!’

‘What?’

‘The lake, the rainbow: they took him. They swallowed him,’ Carla’s voice trembled.

‘He was pushing me under,’ she turned to Laura. ‘I didn’t want him to die.’

She closed her eyes, hugged her torso, and began to hum.

The lake had absorbed all the rainbow colours; the pebbles had transformed into a collection of precious stones.

The nymph had returned to the shore with a new song.

SAMANTHA BURTON

*Ice creams and sunsets*

The soft rumble of Hallie's car did not soothe her as she swung into the car park she knew all too well. She switched off her engine. Everything fell too quiet.

She let her head sit back on the head rest and let a few more tears fall.

Slowly, she blinked her eyes open. Everything blurred from the tears. Even on the thousandth time, the view took her breath away: clear blue ocean stretched on for miles. Light skipped and danced on top of the water as the waves swayed into each other.

The laughter of approaching children filled the car. Families walked along the chalk cliffside, most with a picnic basket in their hands. Children begged their parents for ice cream from the van at the top of the path. Parents shook their heads and said something to their children that Hallie couldn't hear.

Hallie gripped the leather steering wheel, her knuckles white. She ran her sleeve underneath her nose and a small sad smile pinched her lips. Her family would tell her that it looked like snails were crawling up her arms.

Hallie sighed, rubbed her face, and climbed out of the car. She fought against the wind and shoved her hair up into a messy ponytail. The wind whirled around her and snuck under her clothes. She tightly wrapped her cardigan over her shoulders and kept walking.

Seagull screeches signalled their dive bombs for people's ice cream and chips. Some teenagers chased after the blasted sea chickens but they were persistent creatures, intent on stealing the children's food.

Hallie looked at the rocks and waves the way she would look into a mirror. She shook her head slightly.

Smiling, Hallie made her way up the path, unaware of the steps she was taking. Happy families occupied rows of weathered benches. An old woman sat on the edge of one of the benches.

Slowly, Hallie approached her and asked gently, 'Do you mind if I sit?'

The old lady warmed her with a smile. 'Well, of course my dear, sit, sit,' she said as she moved her bag to make space.

Hallie sat back and stretched out a few knots in her neck. 'I've never seen it so busy here before.'

The woman beside her looked up and down the path. 'Yes, you seem quite right. Well, I guess these are the times now. No spot is secret anymore. Not with the internet around and everyone telling everyone everything.'

Hallie hummed a response.

'Tell me dear, what's your name?'

'Hallie.' She turned to look at the woman.

The woman gave her a gentle smile. 'Hallie... what a beautiful name. Well, it's lovely to meet you, Hallie, I'm Joanna.'

Tears came to Hallie's eyes again. 'It's lovely to meet you too, Joanna.'

'Tell me dear, what's wrong?'

Hallie sniffled and shrugged her shoulders. 'I just broke up with my boyfriend of three years.'

Joanna looked off across the sea. 'Right,' she said and grabbed her purse. 'You deserve the best ice cream in the world.' She stood up on shaky legs as if she was knee deep in water.

Joanna made her way up the chalky path; she didn't look back once to see if Hallie was following. Hallie smiled.

Hallie looked out onto the horizon. Sometimes cargo ships would pass by in the distance, so far away it looked like they were going to crash into each other. When Hallie was little, she would wave frantically and imagine that the crew was waving back at her. Her grandmother would always say she had an overactive imagination, while her mother would always try and rub more sunscreen onto her.

Hallie trailed after Joanna, who still hummed to herself.

At the top of the path, like always, sat a white and pink ice cream van. A few children bounced with their freshly scooped ice cream. A few seagulls stalked the children like prey, but the ice cream man blared music to scare them off. A couple giggled as they shared an ice cream and used their bodies to shield it as they made their way back down the path.

'Tim!' Joanna called out.

Hallie inhaled a sharp breath and blinked her wet eyes.

Tim looked over at the two of them approaching and smiled. He was roughly Joanna's age; he had been here for as long as Hallie could remember. 'What can I get you two lovely ladies?'

'Tim! Meet my new friend Hallie!' Joanna's voice matched the kids.

Tim's brows bunched upwards. His eyes quickly darted to Hallie before returning to Joanna. He put on a warm smile. 'Let me guess, Joanna, an ice cream with a flake in it?'

'Oh Tim, you know me too well.' Joanna waved her hand in the air. 'Hallie here has had a hard day and there is nothing better to cheer her up than the best ice cream in the world.'

'Ah, well, for that then, you both get an extra flake,' he said and handed them their ice creams.

'Thank you dear, have a lovely day.' Joanna pivoted on her heels and headed back down the chalk path.

‘Good luck, Hallie,’ Tim said, just low enough for her to hear. She wiped her sleeve underneath her nose and nodded before hurrying to catch up with Joanna.

Beams of light danced between the tall blades of grass. The sun kissed the top of the water. Hallie looked out across the horizon and squinted.

The sun was finally setting; Hallie’s mum would be home soon. Families started to load into their cars, despite the children’s protests. More dog walkers appeared; it was finally quiet enough for their dogs to play in the water.

‘You know,’ Joanna said as she sat back down on the bench, ‘Tim started working that van back when my parents used to bring me here as a young girl.’

Hallie smiled to herself. ‘He must love it if he’s still here.’

‘Who wouldn’t?’ Joanna beamed. ‘When I die, I want my ashes to be scattered here.’ She seemed to go in on herself. ‘This is where I met my husband. We both wanted the last ice cream from Tim, so we decided to share it.’

‘That’s beautiful.’

‘I tried to drag him out today with me, but the lazy bastard is too tired.’ Joanna chuckled. ‘I’ll tell you this, always drag your grandfather out, and your father when he gets old, so they still enjoy life.’

Hallie sat back on the bench, her eyes glued to the view. ‘I did. Whenever I would go out for big adventures, I would always drag my grandad out with me. He’s passed away now, a few years ago, but I still miss him.’

Joanna placed a gentle hand on her knee. ‘I’m so sorry, my dear. I didn’t know him, but it sounds like you kept him young. That’s my only wish for my children and grandchildren.’

Hallie ran her sleeve underneath her nose again and sniffled.

‘Oh, look at you,’ Joanna tutted. ‘It looks like snails have been crawling all over your arms. Here, take this tissue.’

‘Thank you,’ Hallie croaked.

Joanna smiled at her. ‘Where are your parents, my dear? It’s getting awfully late.’

‘They work in the city. They’re probably on their way back now.’

Joanna hummed again. ‘That’s what my children ended up doing. There’s more money there than here. I hardly get to see them anymore.’

‘When was the last time you saw them?’

She slapped her hands onto her knees. ‘Oh, it must have been a couple of years now, we’re all too busy. But I do miss my dear grandbaby, the most beautiful granddaughter you could ask for. She must be four now. How time flies.’

Hallie hummed. A buzz from her pocket caught her attention: a message from her mum.

She took in a deep breath and slowly let it out, almost stalling.

‘Come on. We should really get you home.’

‘Sorry, my dear?’

‘Granny,’ Hallie said slowly, the word too difficult to get out, ‘we need to get you home. I’m your granddaughter. I’m twenty-two now. I guess time does really fly by.’

Hallie pulled out her purse to give her the photos.

The first was of Joanna. Her hair was black in this one. In her arms was a baby who is deeply asleep. The second was of Joanna standing behind a small child. A few grey hairs started to show in this one. The small child was holding a trophy, and they both had beaming smiles on their face.

In the last photo, which was only a couple years old, they were both dressed up. They sat around a table with a few other people

who are in the photo. Hallie was wearing a Happy Birthday badge and at the end of the table, there were presents.

'I... I don't remember... ' Joanna stumbled over her sentence.

'It's okay,' Hallie said softly. 'Because I remember enough for the both of us. I need to get you home so mum can help you too.'

'No... no... my little baby is only four...'

'I was, but I'm all big now,' Hallie tried to give her a comforting smile.

'I've missed so much... ' A tear fell from Joanna's eye.

Hallie placed a hand over hers. 'You haven't missed anything. We can show you everything when we get home.'

Joanna's eyes were distant, as if she was no longer there. 'Okay,' she said, her voice hollow.

Hallie stood up with her hands open to guide Joanna. She stood on shaky legs. Hallie hooked her arm through Joanna's and guided her down the path to her car. Hallie opened the car door and Joanna slowly climbed in, the light in her eyes now gone.

Another tear fell from Hallie's eye as she walked around the car. She wiped her sleeve across her face and got in. As they pulled out, chalk kicked up from the tyres and created a cloud of smoke. The soft rumble of the engine helped soothe them both as they drove home in silence.

SINEAD 'SILVIE' COX

*Solace*

There is one constant that has never made sense to me: humans. As far as I know, I was considered to be one of these 'people'. But if I was, how do I explain why I was so different from the others? Their ways of talking and interacting with each other were lost on me. When I felt sad, they told me to find solace in the people around me. But the people around me brought nothing but sadness. This 'human' brain of mine was filled with nothing but a pain that disconnected me from the world. What I would give to be no longer human. To be something else entirely that does not need to trouble itself with human emotions and human problems.

To be free.

In what world could solace be found within humans? All of them – us – are just products of the negative emotions built up within and around us. The neglect of a child creates a hate-filled adult; the heartbreak of a failed relationship creates a woman devoid of love; the loss of those you once loved creates a black hole that cannot ever be filled again. Solace is not a concept that can be offered by something as damaged as a human. Solace is found in quiet; in peace and isolated contemplation. It was perhaps found in a church overgrown by the vines of the earth, forgotten by all but me. It was there that I felt less human, yet more human than ever before. The ivy curled beneath my touch, and the wind embraced me in twisting tendrils of cold that wiped the humanity from my body. And in this church I met her; my salvation, my true solace.

Beneath a moon enveloped in weak clouds, she watched over me while I allowed myself to forget all that destroyed me. The worries



of my father, the expectations of my mother, the overwhelming emptiness that replaced my emotions. All of these ceased to exist when I stood between pews, staring into the cracked glass at the far end of the church. It was a short walk from my home, yet somehow was never encroached on by anybody but me. Inside were overturned pews – some remained in the right orientation – facing a dilapidated altar which was still adorned with a white altar cloth, albeit yellowed and faded from years of abandonment. Crawling through broken windows depicting saints were thick vines of ivy and wisteria, and beneath my feet the roots of weeds reached out to the heavens above. This church must've been some hundred years old: devoid of paint and any electrical lighting, it certainly had no artificial heat sources. In this beautiful, decaying church I could remove myself from civilisation and pretend that I had always been alone, in my own world that didn't exist to those outside.



The first time I met her, she was nothing more than a monster. I had outstayed my welcome, and I could feel it. On that day I had been begging to anything that could hear me to take me from this world – to take me somewhere that didn't require a heart. My mind had been so loud, and I so desperately needed silence. Even in my own company, I failed to escape the sorrows of being a human. But that day, it seemed that I was finally heard. Huddled on the cold wood of the front pew, the moon withheld its light in that spot, and I became a shadow. The only warmth was that of my silent tears.

Until there was a sudden searing pain in my neck, followed by the heat of my blood being drained by my attacker. I was paralysed. The throbbing seemed to only last a few moments before I felt nothing, only the strange sensation of my life-force ebbing away. It had all happened within seconds – I hadn't yet realised I was not alone. I remained motionless with confusion clouding my



mind as I attempted to regain my autonomy. My senses began to return after the initial shock, and I felt it then: something like two needles piercing the side of my throat, and below them a row of several more pricking my skin. And between them was my blood pouring. A cold hand had closed around the other side of my neck, holding me still as my energy faded. There was no feeling of panic; I felt strangely relieved.

My body relaxed beneath the vice-like grip, closing my eyes as the assault endured, feeling my head become lighter and lighter. Strangely, I began to smile. As the corners of my mouth curved, the needles were extricated from me, but a hand remained around my neck. I opened my eyes.



Reader, she was beautiful. Even without moonlight, her skin gleamed porcelain, and her eyes were the deepest crimson. My blood was dripping from her chin, and her lips were stained from the saturation. When I looked at her, there was a ghost of a smile on her face, fangs flashing. Our eyes remained locked, gazing at each other – hers filled with a mix of wonder and satisfaction, and mine, I suppose, were filled with a similar emotion. As we eyed one another, I was seized with a peculiar desire to pull her closer to me and allow her to feast on me. It arrested my body, filling me with a desperate need. Before I could form a course of action, she dropped her hand and stood upright with a languid grace, contemplating my face once more. Then she was gone from my vision. The speed with which she moved could not be followed by my human eyes – a blur of darkness appeared and disappeared within a second, and she was gone.



The moon had moved in the meantime, with light caressing my face, reaching what was left in shade moments before. Warm blood still trickled down my neck; I touched it lightly. Multiple puncture



wounds decorated my skin as my fingers traced the craters left on my throat. When I ran my hands over them, the fresh memory of her teeth in me replayed anew. I hadn't yet figured it out, but a change was already occurring within me from this moment.

Most people would almost certainly avoid this church after having such an experience, but I knew my brain was not wired like 'most people'. I spent three days away, attempting to integrate with the other humans like me, but it was not welcoming. There was still my lack of understanding, my lack of connection. With each passing day, the weight on my heart grew, and there was something new growing, too. Something like a thirst, a longing. Something that told me I needed to return. Each night, I dreamt of her and woke in a cold sweat; the puncture wounds on my neck were throbbing. After the third night, I couldn't resist anymore. I so badly needed a break from this world, and there was still a deep urge within me luring me to return. And there was confusion – I wanted to go back to discover if those events had even been true.



So I returned. The sun was almost set, the top barely reaching above the horizon, and the darkness of the night had come to escort me back. Vines and nettles grasped at my legs as I ventured through the verdure to reach my beloved church. Arriving, it was empty. For some reason, there was disappointment in my heart that felt like a deflation. This was the one place I should not be feeling such emotion. Yet here I was, feeling my heart deflate without ever realising it had grown. It was immature to have expected anything, and I thought I should just turn back. But before I turned: I saw a blur in the shadows above. I peered upwards with squinted eyes, trying to adjust my vision to the obscurity in the spire; I could see her then.

Her form was concealed in the darkness, but I knew it was her. My visitor was there, observing me as I was her, and we remained in those frozen positions for some time.

I was transfixed, unblinking. Any sane person might've fled, returning only with the company of a priest or an exorcist to cleanse the holy building now tainted by demons, but I remained. Something like her should not feel confusion, yet I could see movement, a tilted head beneath her veil of shadows. The pull towards her returned, and my head moved of its own volition to incline upwards and bare my neck to the cold air. There was a low growl – perhaps it was the wind, or perhaps it was her hunger. My eyes remained on the darkened form above, but she had moved without me knowing.

Within seconds, my throat had been grasped, my body pressed against the frozen stone walls as she sank her teeth into me. I was seized by the familiar rush of pain, and then relief. A tear pricked my eye. This is what most humans would assume is their death, but all I could feel from her was gentleness, her hand on my neck loosening and the space between us widening. She drank from me, but the moment my body began to weaken, she ceased the assault. I leaned against the wall, regaining strength as my blood once again trickled down the skin of my neck, and when I looked sideways she stood still, arms by her sides as my own blood settled on her ghostly white skin. Possibly, I intrigued her.

When she spoke, it felt as though I had been pierced through the heart. For what reason did her voice have such an effect on me? She only asked, 'Why have you returned?' Not a soft voice, or quiet, but low and demanding; threatening. As it travelled through my ears, I exhaled softly, like I had to brace myself for the feelings it would evoke. My own voice struggled to escape my throat.

I placed a hand against the wall, steadying myself, and I whispered just one word: 'You.'

She tilted her head again, and I found it charming. I smiled and said, 'Am I the only one you see?'

Silence fell over the church, and I could not even hear her breathing. She wiped blood from her chin, letting it smear over her hand, and said nothing. Maybe she did not understand me. Of course she didn't; nobody could. I remained silent after this, simply looking at her and she at me. It was a strange experience, to simply stare at someone as they stare right back without any exchange of words. The puncture wounds on my neck were stinging, and I rubbed my hand over them under her watchful eye. She tracked each movement with eerie intensity.

I did not know what to do. All I could think was to stand there in front of her. Something about her had enchanted me, and I never wanted to leave her presence. She must've had a different idea, though, because she turned away quickly, moving towards the doors at the end of the church. As she approached the exit, she paused, and turned her head to me. Was she bidding for my company? I couldn't read her, but it was no surprise: I couldn't read anybody. The wind was picking up again, and it swirled around us both. Black hair was whipped up, circling her as it danced in the breeze. Even beneath such strong gusts she remained graceful and beautiful. But I was a human, and I cowered. The wind pressed against me, attempting to pick me up and throw me to the floor. I blinked once, trying to clear my eyes of tears brought about by the stinging cold, and she was gone.

Predictability is a human trait I know very well. So, of course I returned once again. The next day, for that matter.

She was not, as I expected, at the top of the spire, but sat on



one of the pews, facing the altar. A creature like her mustn't pray, but I could not think of what else she could've been doing in such a position. For a few moments, I paused in the entryway, watching her. She had the stillness of the dead. If I had not been looking for her, I suppose I would not have even noticed her with the way she sat unstirring and silent, as though she were part of the building itself. She could have been another statue, something to worship with knees pressed to cold stone, reaching in your heart to a false idol.

The statue remained as I walked forward, tentatively, my eyes trained on her as though I even had the chance of tracking her movements should she decide to act. But instead of moving, she spoke to me. Her head did not turn, but her voice echoed around me, reaching the heights of the ceiling above.

There was no trace of malice, unlike the time before: 'You returned.'



My steps faltered, as did my heart. Again, I had the feeling of it being pierced upon hearing her melody, my face softening in time. Maybe this was something her kind could do – ensnare their prey with only a voice. It had worked on me. I did not speak, only continuing my approach to her. When I reached the front pew, she turned her gaze towards me, watching me take a seat on the opposite end from her. As I sat, she stood. Silence pervaded our space, and I could feel her gaze on me.

Within the time of a single blink, she had moved to stand before me. I opened my eyes to a hand outstretched, and I knew what she wanted of me.

When I looked up at her, for some unknown reason she stopped in her tracks. When I saw her face, I saw something resembling emotion. She was frozen in place, a beautiful, eerie painting, feeling a sentiment that a human like me had evoked. In her eyes was a

dullness I had never glimpsed before, and in her body was a weakness, some invisible weight. So, I held out my wrist for her, and she reached out her hand again, closing it gently over my skin. She leaned down, her lips mere centimetres from my wrist, but before she could feast on me, she paused again. There was an emotion inking into those deep red eyes as she looked to me, asking an invisible question.

You may think, dear reader, that I am quite mad, but I stood up, holding my wrist to her mouth with a smile. Upon seeing this smile, something like confusion flickered in her beautiful eyes. Perhaps I had really, truly lost my mind. With this gesture, I offered myself to her, giving her permission to do with me whatever she pleased. The grip on my wrist tightened, and her cold breath glided over my skin. Blood rushed through my veins, begging to break free. Then I felt her piercing my skin. As she drank, she kept her eyes fixed upon my face. Something emboldened me in this moment – an insanity, I suppose – and I placed my other hand on her cheek to cup her face. Strangely, she leaned into it, extracting her fangs from my arm. Blood – my blood – was dripping from the tips of her teeth and trickled down the corner of her mouth. There was a ghost of a smile on her lips. With my bloodied wrist, I pulled her towards me, and nestled my head on her chest.

On that night, I felt warmth from the coldest being. My mind had been so loud, and she had effortlessly quietened it. Within moments, she had awkwardly mirrored my movements, wrapping her arms around me and dropping her head close to mine. I looked up at her once again, and I could see her eyes brightening into a glowing crimson, the same that had entranced me when we had first met. We remained, two statues joined together. Her breath was cold as she sighed; a soft sigh which somehow heated

my cheeks up against hers. When she spoke this time, it did not pierce my heart.

‘Darling, what is your name?’ Pressed against me, her voice reverberated through my body, and I leaned into her.

‘Aura.’

As I breathed my name, her arms tightened around me, pulling me into her. It was like nothing I had experienced before. For the first time in my melancholy, disastrous life, I was feeling something like tenderness, like love. She held me so gently, so close. The softness of the moment brought more tears to my eyes, but this time, they did not accompany their usual emptiness. It was like she could sense them – the second they breached my eyes, she pulled away to peer into my face, tracing the tears on my cheeks.

‘Aura, why do you cry?’

Her question, if anything, made my tears grow: I could not answer. I often asked it of myself, each day, begging for anything to tell me why. Any other question in the world I could at least attempt to answer, but this question was perhaps the biggest mystery of my life. Why do I cry? Why do I feel so numb, yet cry? In the absence of my answer, she pulled me closer once again. I felt wetness from above, like drops of rain. They trailed down my face, mixing with my own tears. Was she crying with me?

I felt her hand on my chin. My face was tilted upwards, and I saw then – tears dancing over her skin, my own sorrow reflected in her eyes. She looked at me for a few moments, before asking another question.

‘Would you let me help you?’

I wasn’t quite sure what she meant. But she looked so sincere, so concerned. I gave the faintest of nods, and she smiled at me again.

There is not enough time in the world for me to cherish her smiles as they should be.

Before I knew it, she had kissed me.

It wasn't a kiss in the general sense of it; perhaps because, when I reflexively gasped, her blood filled my mouth. She clamped my mouth shut with her own, and the only choice offered was for me to swallow the blood. It was sweet, metallic, and I winced. Her lips were soft, her touch soothing, but through it I could feel the tips of her teeth pressing into me.

When she pulled away, stray droplets of blood escaped from my lips, and she wiped them away for me. Her eyes looked more alive than I had ever seen them, and she pulled me to sit back down onto the pew. A second too late and I would have collapsed onto the floor. My vision darkened, and I lost consciousness within moments.

Upon waking, I saw her gazing down at me. My head was rested in her lap, her hands stroking my hair. The immediate waking was normal, but then the pain hit me moments later. There was a burning in my throat, in my gums and in my eyes. Without thinking, I reached out to her, pulling her down to me as though she could absolve the agony which devoured me.

All she did was smile.

My hands clutched at her, and I rasped, 'Carmen.' She had never told me her name. Yet she responded with a soothing hum of approval. She held her wrist in front of me, and I could form no other thoughts, other than the overwhelming desire for the blood taunting me beneath her skin. The burning of my gums heightened, and I could feel my own teeth extending, protruding. My mouth clamped down on her, teeth piercing through delicate skin. As her blood flowed into my mouth, massaging the burning



at the back of my throat, my body relaxed and I closed my eyes once again.

There are not many more memories of that night. But, since then, I have not been human, and I have not wished to be a human again. The immediate abandonment of all that made me a human – my family, those I called my friends – was easier than expected. All I really needed was her: Carmen. Now that I think of it, there had always been somebody listening when I was crying in that church. She was there, listening and watching, hearing and understanding me. I had been asking for all of that time for somebody to hear me, and she had been there. And now, she will be with me forevermore. Our blood flows within each other, and we ask for nothing else in this world.



Gone are the days of emptiness, of a void in my soul. She fills me entirely, with a love and a passion I had never known possible. There is only one thing I need to feel solace and understanding – Carmen.



FRANCESCA DOWDESWELL

*Reasons to stay dead*

*For Andrea. I do enjoy our chats.*

Nobody likes being woken up, especially not from the grave.

It's an age-old question: what happens when you die? Do you come back as something else? Do you disappear forever? Does a jackal-headed god weigh your heart against a feather to see if you get into the afterlife?

People spend all their time living concerned about dying. In my opinion, it's not all it's hyped up to be.

Despite that, I much prefer death to being alive. When you're alive, there's so much weight on you. You carry yourself, your responsibilities and your past. In death, you are light. There are no wants or needs.

I know that I'm alive again because I *want* to be weightless.

Yet somehow, I am light. In life I was stiff. Now, I can move freely, like I'm floating. I look down to check if I really am but my feet are standing two inches below the carpet.

That can't be right.

My ankles rise from the worn carpet, almost translucent. I look around the room for something familiar but I don't recognise anything. There are so many cables like the roots of a plant sourcing water from every corner. There are so many posters of boys in bands and boys in cars and boys who desperately need a haircut.

'Huh,' says an emphatic voice. 'I always pictured you with a beard.'

She looks like dust but she stands like a building in the wan moonlight. She can't be more than fourteen years old. She crosses

her arms and leans on one foot, bobbing back and forth. She thinks I can't see her picking at her chewed jumper sleeves.

'What? What is this?' This is the first time I've used my voice since my last words. It's still tobacco rough but I no longer feel the sandpaper scratching my throat. I don't think I feel anything anymore.

The girl rolls her eyes, feigning cool. 'This is a seance. Duh.'

I'm already becoming more used to this state. It comes back slowly.

I'm running up the road, chasing a paper plane. I unfold the plane, my hands ageing. The note says, 'Will you go to the Snowball with me?' She circled no. The no becomes a rejection letter after I sent off my first piece to the school newspaper. The front page is me graduating, forcing a smile and gripping the diploma. The diploma unfolds; it's my first published piece. It's at the back but who cares, still published. The article reads a silly little love letter I wrote to the woman who lived in the flat next door. She reads it aloud; she is reading our wedding vows. We're signing the papers, and the lease to our first house, and on the next page, I am signing our son's birth certificate.

There is too much to remember.

'So,' the girl says, 'I bet you're wondering why I summoned you out of all the ghosts.'

'Look kid, I get it. You wanted some fun. Wow! A ghost! So cool! Now, the fun's over. Send me back.'

'No, no. I summoned you for a reason. I need help with my school project. It's history and you were alive a really long time ago.'

'I died in 1989!'

'That's like, centuries ago.'

'Wait, what year is it?'

'2022.'

2022. Thirty-four years. Not *centuries* but wow. That's further than the DeLorean went. I thought humanity would have ended itself somehow by then. Maybe that's just still to come.

The girl huffs. 'Look, are you going to help me or not?'

'Why do you need me? Read a book.'

'That's a lot of effort.'

'More effort than a seance?'

She huffs. I can tell she's biting the inside of her cheek, a habit I always tried to get my son out of. She reminds me of him. There's a similarity in the eyes, the posture, and the mannerisms. My mind is cobwebbed and slow but is working.

I smile, unsure of whether or not she can see it. 'So, how are we related?'

Her eyebrows perk up. 'How did you know?'

'I'm dead, not stupid.'

The girl stands pensive for a moment, carefully aware of the power balance. I cannot leave until she allows it; she can let me go if I am no use to her.

Finally, she speaks. 'My name is Lottie. You're my Grandpa Charles. Obviously, I was born wayyyyyy after you died but you interest me. My dad says he doesn't remember much about the 80s and that I should have asked you. You were a journalist so you knew everything.'

'I don't think he meant it literally, kid.'

'I just want my homework done right. You'd really rather I use some dumb book than a real source? Really?'

'You're Mikey's daughter?' I say.

She nods.

*That makes sense, I think. People in this family know how to get what they want.*

I was wrong about the future.

For everything I tell Lottie, there is something for her to tell me.

I tell her that after a long day on the typewriter, I'd wind down playing solitaire on the computer. She tells me that her dad taught her solitaire. She plays it instead of typing at the computer.

I tell her about going to the cinema to see *Ghostbusters*. She tells me she went to see it too because she likes Paul Rudd and Finn Wolfhard. I have no idea what she is talking about.

I tell her that nothing was ever really monitored back then. You could come and go from places as you pleased; nothing was ever locked. She tells me that her teachers wouldn't let her leave school with her babysitter because she wasn't registered as her guardian.

I always pictured the future as a place of flying cars and lasers. You would be free to do what you want between feeding your robot dogs and your job at the space station. From what I'm hearing, not much has changed in that regard.

Humanity has come far though. Humans always want faster and bigger. You can never go fast enough. Never be big enough. I still think this will ultimately be what ends us. I must be right about that.

'Wow.' Lottie's pen slides off the edge of the paper. 'Dad said you talked a lot but I thought he was exaggerating.'

'I talk a lot?' I say. I think I'm smiling. 'Has Mikey heard himself? That boy could talk for England!'

With the flourish of a full stop, our chat comes to an end.

I ask her to read it back to me. She hits all the key points: Chernobyl exploding in the USSR, Diana and Charles' wedding and the Hungerford Massacre. That one was scary because it could have happened anytime, anywhere.

She says she remembers those points best because they still happen: nuclear power, royal weddings and mass killings. I guess the world isn't so different.

'Well, Lottie,' I start, 'If you don't ace this homework I'll be sure to haunt your teachers.'

'Thank you, Grandpa.'

The word hits my ears strangely. *Grandpa*. It's like when I became a father. To be more than that, to be *grand*, is stranger still. Then I remember that I'm not really her grandfather. I am, yes. But I'm gone. You can hardly call a dead man family.

'Actually...,' she twirls the ends of her braid. 'Can you go over some of this stuff again?'

'Look at all those notes. You have more than enough.'

'Can you tell me a little more about when Maggie Smith was Prime Minister?'

'Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister.'

'See! I need more help!'

People in this family know how to get what they want. I think this is my fault. I inadvertently taught it to my son when he buttered me up enough to buy him a Yoda toy. Flattery is a powerful thing. Unfortunately for Lottie, curses don't always work on their creators.

I know when someone is hiding something too. That comes with being a journalist.

Everyone was fighting for the big stories back then. There was so much change. We wanted to be a part of it without being a part of it. We would be like chroniclers in a tavern taking down a hero's tale.

I know how to get answers.

'This isn't going to work, kid,' I say. 'I want to go back to being dead.'

'Why? Being dead can't be that great.'

'I'm getting on fine with it.'

'Isn't it lonely being dead? You don't have friends. You don't have anyone. You don't have thoughts. How do you know if someone loves you?'

'Okay, that's enough. Stop talking and send me back.'

'You're only saying that because I'm right.'

'I'm saying that because you're pissing me off.'

*But she is right.*

The world was just beginning when I died. There was the world wide web, the fall of the Berlin wall and a great new band called Nirvana. It was a busy new world. It moved so fast. I couldn't keep up.

I chased the paper plane up that hill and unfolded it. I was getting laid off. I wasn't fast or big enough. I tried to pass my stories around but nobody would take them. My wife grew distant from me. I grew distant from my son. I spent my days alone. The plane became prescription. After that, the paper tears off, forced to an end.

*She is right.*

'Let me leave,' I say through gritted teeth. Apparently, ghosts can do that.

'I have more work to do.'

'I want to go back to being dead.'

'I want to talk more.'

'I want to go.'

'Isn't the point of a ghost to stick around for longer than they're meant to?'

'I thought I was just your homework.'

'No! I never even had homework!'

A beat passes. You can almost hear it. The weight of the silence pushes our lungs together until Lottie collapses on the floor and begins weeping.

I was taught from a young age that boys don't cry.

I wanted to cry when I fell off my bike and my friends left me behind. I wanted to cry when the newspapers kept turning me down. I wanted to cry when the pills were setting in.

My last words slipped through a tear: *I wasn't made for a world like this.*

I wish I stayed dead. I was ignorant then. If I had never woken up, I never would have known what I missed. I never would have known that the world would have moved so smoothly without me. I never would have had to question if I were loved. If I am not loved then did I do anything right?

Boys can't cry. Ghosts wish they could.

Lottie weeps into the chewed sleeves of her jumper. I want to reach for her but my arms would just pass through her small self. Not only can ghosts not know if they are loved, but they also cannot show their love to the ones they left behind.

'I'm sorry,' I say.

She cries on.

'Can you tell me why you really summoned me?'

Her teeth latch onto her sleeves.

'Lottie.'

Her breath labours past her lips, heaving with her chest. I remember what my father used to say to me when I was like this, what I said to Mikey when he was like this.

'I know that there's a lot in your head,' I say, 'but you can let it out.'

'But if I say it, it becomes real.'

'It's probably already real. Even if you're ignoring it.'

She wipes her eyes. They're red and puffy. She no longer looks so grey. She breathes to a rhythm, letting the words work their own way out.

'It's my Dad,' she says. 'He's sick. Not like, getting a few days off school sick. Like, hospital sick. He looks like Voldemort. The last time he went in he came back but my Mum says he's staying there now. He's going to be like you soon. I don't want to say goodbye. I don't want him to go.'

If ghosts could cry...

I remember the paper frailty of my father's skin when I said goodbye to him. I remember wondering if I would go the same way. I always pushed away the idea that it would happen to my son one day too. That's just what we do. We cannot imagine an end to love.

I want to scream. I want to tear my vocal cords. I want to make sure whatever cruel force dictated this knows the pain they have caused. Instead, I say:

'Tell me about him. My son.'

I went when he was so small. I missed so much of him. This is as much as I can give him now.

Lottie tells me about all the times they've been to the Donkey Sanctuary and how every time he takes her photo on the white stone donkey. She tells me about how he let her help renovate the old house and they brought the floor up. That's why my feet are in there; I'm standing where I think I should be. She tells me how he laughs at her jokes, even the ones that aren't very good. He's kind, thoughtful and funny. He's what I wanted to be for him.

'When he's gone,' she says, 'I can't love him. He can't love me either.'

‘You could always summon him as you did me.’

‘I don’t think I can talk to him like this. I don’t want to remember him this way. Also, this was a lot of effort.’

I smile. So does she.

I almost want to stay. I want this girl to smile for the rest of her life. This is as close as I can ever come to loving her, here and now.

I thought my life had amounted to nothing. I thought I’d done everything I could to no avail. I did do everything I could but I made a legacy. I taught these people how to love.

That is something I can be happy with.

I hope she lets Mikey stay dead. He has no reason for his memory to be played with.

‘We love you, Lottie,’ I tell her. ‘We may not be there to tell you it but we do. That’s what we all leave behind. I’d rather be remembered as your Grandpa than as some serious journalist.’

‘We all have to go one day. That’s for certain. But you can talk to me whenever you feel lonely. Now, let me go back to sleep.’

She laughs. Her eyes are big and glistening. She mutters something. Before I can make it out, everything blurs. It’s grey and glimmering but it’s warm. I close my eyes.

It’s one of those days, all grey and rain and steam from hot drinks. A girl walks through a cemetery. Her hood is down. She’s carrying two bouquets of flowers.

The first bouquet she lays on a grave so new its headstone is still being carved. She smiles as she kisses her palm and pats the muddy ground.

The second bouquet she lays on an older grave. Moss covers bits of the lettering. She wipes it away. The flowers touch the ground. A gust of wind carries a white feather to her.

She says, 'Thank you, Grandpa. I'll talk to you soon.'  
Raindrops fall on flower petals.  
There is love in this place.

AMALIE L. FLOA

*August Rain*

As if out of nowhere, it starts to rain. He spots an area where the ground is dry, protected by a tall, roofed structure. Sitting down on the ground, he places his little basket next to him. It's late summer and there is no wind. He decides to stay there for a while. It's safer to do so anyway. The raindrops make a splash when they hit the ground. He makes himself comfortable, leaning against the white, soft pole keeping the roof of the shelter up. A couple of leaves from a nearby oak tree are lying on top of the grass, filling up with water like a cup, slightly tilted, the water dripping down to the ground. Drop after drop at a quick pace.

He peeks out to look up at the tree. Soon, when autumn comes, its acorns will fall and then he'll come back to gather them for his family. Maybe they will all go together, make a fun trip out of it, to gather enough to last them through the snowy winter. His basket is filled with small pieces of raspberries. There is even a small blueberry in there. He looks up. In the far distance he can see a bit of blue-sky peeking through the clouds. It gives him hope that the rain will eventually stop so he can get home before it gets dark. But for now, he must settle for waiting a little longer.

A cat comes stepping through the grass. He's scared of cats, always has been, and hides behind the pole of the shelter, making himself as small as he can. The cat stops and looks in his direction, and he holds his breath, staying completely still. Then the cat keeps walking, showing no signs of having spotted him. He breathes a sigh of relief. The rain is still pouring, so the cat is probably more interested in finding its own shelter.



A small rock lies nearby for him to sit down on, still in the dryness of his shelter. Closing his eyes, he takes in the smells around him: rain, wet grass, and a bit of mud. He smells the strong scent of mushrooms, the cat that passed by not long ago, and flowers but he can't quite tell which ones. Opening his eyes again, he looks around to see which flowers he smells. He spots some daisies and some pink centauries. They're pretty, and he decides that when it stops raining, he's going to pick one or two centauries and bring them home. His basket should have just enough space for them if he picks only the flower and not so much of the stem. It will make for lovely decoration in his family's small home.

As he's sitting there, admiring the flowers he wants to pick, the rain starts to calm down, and he doesn't get splashed with water from the falling raindrops anymore. He's already been out for longer than he planned, but he's sure his family would understand why it took him so long. The rain makes for dangerous travel conditions after all. Hopefully, they haven't been too worried about him. He's sure the centauries he'll pick soon will make up for it.



Soon enough the rain stops. There's just the occasional raindrop falling, mostly from the branches and leaves of the large oak tree next to him. He looks up at the sky and sees that most of the grey clouds have been replaced by white ones and blue sky. He puts his little basket full of berries on his back before he climbs up on the mushroom he's been sheltering underneath. The basket is heavy on his back, making the climbing more of a struggle than it should be. He digs his claws into the stem as he climbs to make sure he doesn't fall while he pushes himself up. When he reaches the top, he takes a breath and looks at his surroundings. He has a much better view from the top than he did underneath since the mushroom is taller than the grass around it, and he realises he's been at the top



of a small hill. He can even see the ash tree his family lives by, so he knows exactly how to get home. There's a small pond in the way, but he knows when he reaches it, he can either just go around it, or he can jump from lily pad to lily pad to cross it, if they're close enough together.

He climbs down from the mushroom and makes his way to the centauries he noticed earlier. He walks slowly to test out the muddy ground, careful not to slip or get stuck. Using his weight, he bends the stem of the plant just enough for the flowers to be within reach. He bites through the stem underneath a couple of the flowers before letting go of it causing the flowerless stem to bounce back to its upright position. He puts the flowers in his basket, on top of all the pieces of raspberries. Then he continues his journey back home to his family. Through the tall grass, around puddles, under mushrooms, and across the pond from lily pad to lily pad. Just a small mouse in a big world on a typical August day.



## *Huldra*

The fog creeps through the forest. Thick pine and spruce trees are scattered around with their branches hanging over the small paths that have been made through years of humans and animals walking through. The sun is setting, and the fog thickens, making it near impossible for anyone to navigate. No one in their right mind would attempt to walk through the forest now. Yet, someone is. A young man is trying to follow a thin path, cursing whenever a branch strikes his face.

He was warned before he set out on his journey. The grey clouds were already hanging low then.

‘Do not go through the forest tonight,’ they said. ‘You’ll get lost in the fog!’

‘Follow the main road,’ someone else suggested. ‘Who knows what lurks around in there?’

But he didn’t listen. He thought he could make it. That the fog wouldn’t be a hindrance. That he’d somehow be able to navigate through a dense and murky forest after sunset. What a fool!

The night is quiet. No birds chirping this late, no wind to rustle the trees. The only noise is from the man struggling through the woods, with his hands in front of him, breaking off any branch that hangs in his way and throwing them to the ground. Had it not been for the haze and the cloudy sky, he could’ve seen the moon. But the moon is out of sight, not protecting him tonight. He’s left to himself. Completely alone.

Or so he thought.

The silence of the night is suddenly replaced by something else. He doesn’t understand what at first, but then he notices it



sounds like a voice. A melody. Someone singing. The voice is soft and beautiful, hitting the notes of the calming tune just right. It flows like water down a stream, without sharp edges or sudden stops. Just sweet, harmonic music. He doesn't know where it comes from. Perhaps somewhere not too far away. Maybe he's closer to his destination than he thought. Music means people, people mean houses, and houses mean he'll soon be out of this forest, right? He doesn't think twice about his decision to follow the sound. After all, why should he? He has nothing to fear. He's young and strong, there's nothing he can't handle.

The music gets louder the further he walks. And he grows smug. Oh, how he'll show them all that they were all cowards. That he is brave and strong and that they shouldn't underestimate him. He'll show them that their so-called Mother Nature's got nothing on him.



The music gets louder and louder until he gets to a point where he can no longer tell from what direction the music is coming. He stops. The melody surrounds him. No matter which direction he turns to face, no matter which direction he tries walking, the strength of the sounds doesn't change. But he can't see anyone. No lights, no houses, no people. Just fog and trees. His half-smile and the smug glint in his eyes disappear, his eyes widening as he frantically looks around him. He finds himself shivering and tries to compose himself by clearing his throat and telling himself that he's not scared. He's not scared of anything. And he's not a quitter. So, he keeps walking, shaking off the chill he had felt just moments ago. He only gets to take a few steps before his feet, for just a second, lose contact with the ground. For one small second, he feels like he's falling before he again feels solid ground underneath his feet. But this ground feels different, and he realises soon enough that he is standing in water up to his waist. He must've accidentally



stepped into a pond. Or maybe a lake. The condensation from the pond or lake adds to the haze and makes it even harder to tell how big this body of water is.

He breathes a sigh of relief, lucky that he had fallen into the shallow part of the water. Noticing the music has stopped, he turns around to climb out. But before he gets a chance to, the singing voice begins again. This time, he feels it coming from behind him and turns back around. The fog is still thick, but this time he can make out the silhouette of someone or something. The voice is softer and more beautiful than he's ever heard before, and he's too captivated by it to say anything. The silhouette comes closer, and he finally gets to see who this magical voice belongs to. A woman walks through the water towards him, only stopping right before him. Her long hair looks golden and frames her face like a painting, and she's wearing a green dress matching the murky water, as if her dress was made from it. She looks human, but something about her makes him feel uneasy.

If it wasn't for her hair covering them, he would've noticed her lynx-like ears. Had it not been for the opaque water, he would've seen that she had a cow's tail. And had she only turned around he would've seen that her back resembled a rotten tree stump. Or maybe he would've been so captivated by her that he wouldn't have noticed any of this anyway. She walks up to him and places her hands on his cheeks. She says something he can't understand, distracted from the shallow end to the deep lake. Deeper and deeper into the water, until they're both gone from the surface, by her melodic and sweet voice. Then she lets go of him and takes a few steps backwards into the water. She gestures for him to follow, and he does without a second thought. From the shallow end to the deep lake. Deeper and deeper into the water, until they're both gone from the surface. Him, never to return again.

AIMAN ISLAM

*To be a child again*

My immigrant parents weren't like others – or should I say, they weren't the cliché stereotypes of Asian immigrants.

They were similar to others in not showing enough affection towards me for my liking. The same when it came to favouring sons over daughters, and, of course, the same when it came to cultural and religious morals.

I am the youngest child. Before you open your mouth and utter how amazing that must have been, how spoiled I must have been, and how loved I must have been, let me spill the tea. Ever since I was a child, I was mature for my age. I had to force myself to grow up and understand grown-up things. I had to understand the implications of being an immigrant in a foreign country that would never be my own, despite being raised in it since I was two.

My childhood in Italy could have been a fairy tale, but it was a nightmare. No freedom to hold on to, no dreams to catch; I grew up thinking my life is to be determined by my parents and my elders.

My dad made a rushed decision to embark on a life-changing journey, without consulting any of his children. No, sorry, that's a lie, of course he consulted – but only with his sons. Because when it came to this stuff, I was indeed too young.

At thirteen, I stepped foot in London, with bags filled with nothing but broken English and insecurities. Upon my arrival here I was forced to take on more responsibilities, now that it was just me and my sister present with my father in a new country, with his sons absent and unable to help him.

With my broken English and a dictionary in hand, I helped my father fill in every form known to mankind. But I was not praised

for it once. It was as though all I did was expected of me. I was only thirteen but I might as well have been twenty.

When it came to their needs, I was always old enough, but when it came to my own I was too young. I never received a word of encouragement or praise from my family. Nothing I did ever made them happy.

My father always said that I make everything go wrong. That I'm good for nothing. That's very funny, isn't it? Because it's me they call when they require help.

Our community always portrays the eldest child of an immigrant family to be worked to death by the parents. The eldest daughter parents the youngest. While all of that is true, I am so tired of the youngest child being known as the spoiled one. I have never been spoiled by my family, let alone my parents.

Ever since my family moved to London, I've been the oldest, the middle, and the youngest all at once. I am given all the responsibilities when my parents are out of the country. What does a fourteen-year-old know about responsibilities? Of financial matters?

How many children worry about rent? And taxes? How many children even know how much their parents are paying? Well, I was and am one of them.

My mother never cut fruit for me and brought them for me while I studied. My father never got ten boxes of oranges just because I mentioned that oranges were good. My parents never cared about my academic needs or wants, but if I got bad grades, of course, it was my fault. Not the environment I am forced to study in. Not the toxicity I live through.

My father endured a lot of hardship to bring me and my family abroad to a foreign country. I will forever be grateful, but I must not be called selfish for wanting my parents' love.

For wanting to be a child and for wanting to have dreams.

STEPHANIE IVANOVA

*Records Of Tomorrow*

RECORD ONE

*Sex: Male. Class: Unworthy. Status: Immune. Age: Wasted. Fate: Unnecessary.*

The voice that came out was female. It was gentle and nursing, almost motherly. A hand rose, a bullet flying into the core of a little eye of light. The machine trembled and fell with a hollow bang on the floor. The light blinked a few times, turning yellow and then red, before finally going out as if a soul was leaving the cold husk.

The pain came with the realization of the wound, rather than with the bullet itself. He looked down at the wound, trying to remember when the machine managed to shoot him but his mind was blank. He pressed his palm to the leaking hole, his skin becoming scarlet. For a second his vision became blurry and nearly black. His arm grabbed the broken window frame beside him, giving himself a moment to come back to it. He looked down at the model. He had heard about it. The one that could decide your fate from a single scan. He missed the old times. You know when people simply got up, got to work, and came home tired. He was just a little boy when the pandemic happened, but he still remembered the first wave. The way they dragged out his parents and shot them in the head. He was hidden in the cupboard like a little mouse, the same way he's been hiding these last decades. In the times when humans were still doing their dirty work before they turned to machines.

*'Age...wasted...'* the words of the machine echoed in his mind. He ripped out the machine's chip, wondering how much of his information was sent out. He needed to move fast before another

came. He grunted as the wound in his shoulder reminded him of itself. The pain started running down his arm, making his fingers tickle as if ants were running up and down.

Now inside his home, he lies down in bed. Back to his little... life. Why did he keep calling it that? He was not certain. To anyone else, this was not a life, just some sort of survival. He thought a few times that maybe that machine was right. *'Unnecessary.'* He was all alone, not even remembering when his last real conversation with a human being was, let alone physical contact with one. He lived in the Ash Ruins of the old town knowing that no one would bother searching there. He was the only one crazy enough to live there. So many times he could swear he had seen it. That dark shadow with wings hovering over him, patiently waiting for him to give in. To die. Yet he was surprised by his will to live. Why was he still holding on? To what? He should have let go many years ago. He felt the cold of the steel in his palm. Was he ready to finally let go?

His finger closed around the metal blade when a little female scream awoke him from the depths of despair.

'Sex: Female. Class: Transition. Status: Vulnerable. Age: Middle. Fate: Decision.'

#### RECORD TWO

*Sex: Female. Class: Superior. Status: Immune. Age: Fulfilled. Fate: Secured.*

The woman gazed at her reflection in the round mirror. She turned to the machine behind her, it was slowly exiting the room. The morning routine was ahead with so much to do. She had put so much work into that word, *'Fulfilled.'* She could see every letter written on her face. The age spots, the loose skin, the wrinkles, the dry lips. *'Fulfilled.'* She wanted to laugh. There was a whole life

ahead of her, after all, she was barely seventy. There was plenty of money to ensure her life for a few more decades.

She walked slowly down the spiral staircase, her maid at the bottom, holding her fur coat and her leather purse. The young girl had her head down, not daring to meet her eyes, just as she's always been commanded. This maid was only alive because of her, and she knew it. She would crawl and lick her shoes if that was her master's desire.

Everything was already prepared for her. The town was excited to see her again, even if only for a few seconds. She was living history. The woman that survived. The little lamb that grew into a lion. Once the pitied little wife of a taxi driver, now a diamond shining above them all. She had buried her past, and everyone inside it. Parents, husband, children... everyone. She knew it all. Fights that tear humans into wars, pandemics that corrupted the minds, and technology that did their bidding. And everyone was starving to hear it. Again, and again. Even if she told it word for word, they would still listen. She was life itself.

#### RECORD THREE

*Sex: Male. Class: Unknown. Status: Vulnera. ...*

The axe sliced through the machine as if it was made of butter. His laugh pierced the silent room as if the devil himself was cheering down in hell.

'Scan that... you little bugger.' The man spat on the broken remains of the Seeker. His axe rose again slamming down hard over the machine breaking it into smaller pieces.

'And that.' He stroked again. 'That... that... that...'. With every word, the axe went down, until the wood broke out from the floor.

He finally stopped once there was a hole big enough to fit his leg. 'You think you're smart... look at you now... piece of shit.' He kicked the mechanical organs in the hole and spit over it.

'Vulnerable, you'll see who's vulnerable,' he kept mumbling to himself while going through the house. 'Where is the bloody food? Haven't eaten anything for days... Oi... what are you waiting for? Look!'

He waved his hand at the dog, waiting in the hall. The animal was golden furred, a ribbon on its neck which once upon a time could have been red. A long once upon a time ago. 'Come on, boy... give it up.' The man put his arms around the little plush bear that the dog was holding, trying to take it away from him. 'We don't need that, we need food.' He pulled, but the dog pulled as well. Its long tail started waving happily, ready to play. 'Food, boy. Come on, we don't have time to play.' The dog rose on its back paws pulling hard, the man fell on his bottom. 'Fine. Fine. Have it your way.' The dog let go of the little toy and moved back. The man looked at it. It was one of those vintage build-a-bear types of toys, it was dressed in a black and green robe and had a snake on a crest on its leg. He wondered what kind of sick people found humour in that. Bears with clothes... they never come across a real bear that's for sure. They were not cute and cuddly. They were huge, they were big, they were fast, and their claws nearly tore his back in half. He moved nervously, his back hurting. The dog recoiled back flinging the toy bear landed outside of the window. The man watched as the dog gave chase jumping out after it.

The man looked above this, to the town. To the Superior lands. Where everyone lived inside a safety net of their lies. He had come way too close this time and other Seekers would come soon. He needed to move. There was no food in here, the house was already

whipped clean. The man moved towards the forest, knowing the dog would follow him.

‘You know... I used to live there once,’ he spoke to the dog. ‘Before all this. My pa used to be a taxi driver. Not a big job, but it put food on the table. . .at least it used to in the beginning. Before the fear of the pandemic started. It’s funny how the rich were not immune, their soft asses were so spoiled it got them killed. Some of the poor came into money, the bloody way. My mom... She wanted to become one of them. I often wonder if she made it. She was so cold. I think she had what it took to make it. Yeah, I know she made it. She is life itself.’

#### RECORD FOUR

*No information was found. . .*

*(Tap to search again)*

#### RECORD FIVE

*Sex: Male. Class: Superior. Status: Contagious. Age: Fragile. Fate: Denied.*

His shoulder tried to barge the door down, but the glass didn’t even rattle. His eyes focused on his wife pressing herself against the opposite wall with their new-born child to her chest. The alarm went on louder than before, or maybe that was just in his ears. He could hear people running away from here, but the door was completely sealed and the threat isolated. Why?

‘Open the door!’ He screamed at no one in particular. So many people, yet no one stopped. It would have been done one way or another. No one escapes their fate. ‘My love...’ he whispered looking at his wife. ‘Let go. I know. . . my love. But you must let go.’



His hands touched the glass, looking at the little machine sculling around his wife. Trying to get a straight shot at the new-born baby. The denied one, the affected one. The machine was programmed not to harm his wife. It went against its code.

'Love. . . Please, let go of the child. You are not immune, please my love.' His voice was echoing in desperation. He knew the machine would continue to scan his beloved, waiting for the infection to transfer to her body. And then he would lose everything. It would only take a few minutes.

The hall had emptied from fear of a breach. No one would have helped him anyway. No one. . . a loud noise made him shut his eyes. His body jumped when the second bullet echoed in the small room. His body crushed down, his cries filling the space around him.



RECORD SIX

*Sex: Female. Class: Transition. Status: Vulnerable. Age: Middle. Fate: Decision.*

Her foot clipped the root of a tree sending her crashing hard into the mud. The little machine hovered closer. Only a few more moments left to live. And it was a lie. There was no life flashing in front of you. Just her beating heart echoing in her.

'Wait. . . wait. . .' She lifted her palms. 'I'm in transition. . . the decision has not been made. . . you can't kill me.'

'Correct.' The voice was so soft, yet so vengeful.

'You can record, right?' Her dark eyes looked at the little blinking light. As if it was thinking.

'Correct.'

'If I want to send a message, will you record it? A goodbye?' she begged.

The light started blinking faster, searching among the records.

'Accepted.'

'Thank you.'

'Politeness not necessary,' it replied bluntly.

'Right. Well... ' She leaned back on the tree, looking at the machine. 'Are you recording now?'

'Yes.'

'My name is Selina Storm, I'm twenty-one, well... I was going to be twenty-one in a few days. I guess this won't be happening now.'

The little machine was hovering a meter away from her, making sure to catch every word and all of her. A cold light shined over her body to illuminate her. So how was this going to be used? Selina wondered. As proof everyone can fall? Or as a symbol of their broken society... Was this even going to be seen someday? So many things began to circle in her mind right now, things she never wondered about. Because she was too busy, being perfect for all of them. For her parents, for her siblings, for her friends. Here it goes, perfection in the mud.

'My father lost his fortune three hours ago, I think. I'm not sure... what exactly happened. But he did shoot himself in the head, in his office. I'm sure of that.'

She lifted her arm, looking at the dried blood on her hands. Her eyes shut, trying to chase the image of her father's body, lying lifeless on the desk... the blood forming grotesque art over the silver drapes behind him. Blood and other things, she wished not to remember. 'I guess he lost everything in a way that nothing can be recovered or... ' A sob escaped her lips. It was her father after all. He was not an affectionate man, especially after the death of her mother. The woman at least got a peaceful death. In her warm bed, surrounded by her beloved people, painless.

‘So, I ran once the scan said transition. I don’t want to die. But I’m not the one to decide this, am I? Anyway...’

She looked at the big clear moon. She never until now noticed how beautiful it was. How uneven, rough, and yet... perfect.

‘Patrick, if there is any way this will reach you. I’m sorry. About everything. About the falling apart we had. I never wanted to hurt you I swear. I just... It had to be done. It was better for you. Maybe one day you will see it and will be able to forgive me. I hope you do, even if I’m not here anymore. I just wanted you to know, that I’m sorry it had to be that way. I heard about your baby... I’m so sorry you had to live through it, and I wish I was there to help you recover. That’s all. End recording’

‘Recording has ended.’

‘Thank you,’ Selina whispered licking her lips, tasting the salt of her blood.

‘Politeness not necessary.’

‘Sure... You will kill me in a few seconds.’

‘Possibility over 85%.’

‘So, I have a 15% survival rate, cool!’

She looked left of her realizing there was a lake of a sort. She looked at the water. At the moon’s reflection, wanting something beautiful like this to be in her mind before the end.

‘Sex: Male. Class: Unworthy. Status: Immune. Age: Wasted. Fate: Unnecessary.’

‘What?’ She lifted her head hearing the machine. Before she even realized how, the machine fell into her legs, broken. The light looked at her, slowly fading away.

‘Hurry.’ His voice was hard and rusty as if he hasn’t used it in years. As if he needed to remember how to use it.

‘Who are you?’ She stood up, on her frozen legs.

‘Come on, they will send more Seekers once the signal from this one is lost.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘Somewhere. . . kind of safe.’

‘Kind of safe?’

‘You are free to stay here if you wish. . . and I just wasted a bullet saving you. . . so you kind of owe me.’ He was staying in the shadows of the trees, and she was not sure what to make of him.

‘Why did you save me?’

‘I was lonely, you were about to die. Seemed like a good idea.’ He helped her between the roots of the trees. She looked at him. He was in his mid-30s, and rather handsome. Not what she ever imagined them to be. He was fit and charming, and he even smelled nice. She saw the bandages under his shirt.

‘You are hurt.’

‘Yep, one of them was here a few hours ago. Now I know why.’

‘Sorry.’ She looked down like a guilty child. ‘But. . . why are you protecting me. You heard it.’

‘Humanity still has problems. I’m not going to pretend they will end soon; or that I and you will be riding into the sunset, saving the world.’

‘Then?’ She tried to brush the dirt with her sleeve, but instead of that she just put more dirt on her face.

‘We go at my place, get you cleaned up, get you fed.’

‘And then?’

‘And then day by day, we keep on surviving.’

## *Soul's Confessions*

A confessed sin is half a sin, they used to say. So, I confessed to earn my way. When the bright light was all around me, and the pain was right behind me, I start to tell. A cry of grief was my first confession, and to my mother's breast was my first rest. An only child of parents devoted to the rightful path; my soul was to shine beyond the brightest star.

Like a tree, I grew under the velvet sky, with my roots deep in the ground. My childhood went without a cloud of spiteful words. For my mind was like water, pure with no thought of vain. My mother used to say, 'an angel from her merciful God, her little treasure from above.' To guide the lost ones around, like a flock of fluffy little sheep, onto the truthful path to the gates of gold. So, I took the role my mother so eagerly bestowed upon me without a single thought of the sinful sideways to the rightful path.

My beloved friends were the darkest of shadows and my mother could not defy them. Instead of the rightful image of my heavenly halo, the horns of sin had grown upon my forehead, invisible to even me. We used to play upon the waters from the waterfall, far from the eyes of judging grownups. How tempting was the sky above, and how free were the little souls we have? A small cigarette here and there, a bit from the bottle in bottom drawer that his father used to hide. One sip and then another smoke. It was a day or two... Then years turned as fast as months when my parents saw the dark inside the eyes of their sweet little angel. The world spun around me when my mother's heavy arm bruised my cheek. And when my father's belt licked my skin, I felt the fire of primal rage.



Took the steps down the road with my fearless beloved. An image of true and tempting beauty, with hairs of hellfire and eyes of ice. Skin as soft as silk, and the taste. . . Oh, how sweet was the taste of young wrongful lovers. Early in the morning, the smell was all around me, quiet rip by the whispering steps around the bed. The shadow of lips on mine, to guard my dreams against the nightmare behind the door. Fingers run through my hair, a farewell goodbye, a lucky charm to guard my true beloved in the night. No sign of the coming storm that will approach me. For the love I had, that was to be a sin in the strangers' eyes. Oh, the anger that arose in the rightful souls. Of you and me, of me and you, so alike in their peculiar little minds.



It was the day of darkness. With my hands covered in blood, and my thoughts sore as dirt. There was nothing that could cure the lover in the ground. The hand of justice stroked my back, the hellfire licked my skin. Oh, how I wished for pain, how I wished for death. But between the cold bars, I will dance with sorrow. One, two, three. . . one, two, three. Until I reached the bittersweet chair of my doom. There were no kind words, not even looks. Abandoned by my true beloved, abandoned by the ones who bestow a fearless path on me. O, mother, why have you abandoned your beloved son? O, father why do you curse me so? That I love, the one who is just like me. The one that now lay in the coldest field, waiting on my wilful soul.



TAM PAGE

*Hysteria*

'I don't wanna die.'

Alice watched horrified, as blood splattered the pavement; the sky overhead a swirling cacophony of black clouds and thunderous lightning. The spectators all cheering at the bloody violence that was happening before them.

Almost as soon as it had begun, it was over. She lay on the ground, limbs missing, blood gushing and spurting out, the crowd cheering and jeering all the same. Next to her, Nick grinned.

'What's that? Three wins in a row now?' he asked.

'Shut up.'

Alice gripped her controller and scowled.

Nick laughed and sipped his drink, his favourite fizzy, while Alice allowed herself to smile.

'I'm so trash at games man,' she said.

'Nah mate, you're just not as good as me.'

'Again. Shut up!'

Nick grinned again and Alice pushed him playfully.

'Mate, you're fine,' he said. 'You're getting better.'

'Am I though?'

'Yes, you are. You want me to let you win?'

'Don't you dare.'

Nick laughed again. He was having a good day. He'd been friends with Alice for years and as much as she sucked at fighting games (and she did suck at fighting games) it was always good to see her.

'You want another drink?' he asked, heading to the fridge.

'Yeah, go on,' she said, glancing at her phone. Suddenly she scowled.

‘You alright mate?’

She didn't reply. Leaning into her phone, Alice suddenly looked very pale.

‘What's up, what's happened?’

He gazed at her intently. It wasn't like Alice to freak out, she was normally level headed and calm, but now she looked like she was going to be sick.

‘Hang on a sec.’

She was reading like her life depended on it. Nick hadn't seen her like this for a long time; whatever it was, it was huge.

‘So?’ he asked as she finally put her phone down.

Her hands were shaking, she picked up her drink, took a long gulp from it, took a deep breath and finally turned to look at him.

‘I think we should turn the news on.’

They both watched aghast at the chaos on screen. Fires, screaming people, screams confusion. No one seemed to know what was going on, just only that they should panic.

It was the whole of the UK. London, Glasgow, Cardiff, Belfast, rural villages, bustling seaside towns, every place that had people, had panic and it had started seemingly for no reason, all at once.

‘What's happening?’ Alice was fighting back tears. She would not cry.

‘I... I don't know.’ Shaking his head and draining the rest of his can, Nick shrugged. ‘It'll be over by morning though, don't worry mate.’

Outside, a car alarm blared. The sounds of angry people began drifting in through the window; nothing that could be deciphered, just angry, ranting crowds of people making as much noise as possible. It became louder as the crowd drew nearer. Glass was shattering. People were screaming. Somewhere across the street, a baby cried.

Alice anxiously checked the time. As she feared, her last train was due; she glanced at Nick and he nodded.

‘Obviously. I’m not sending you out there tonight,’ he reassured her. Flooded with relief but terrified still, Alice gave him a small, grateful smile.

‘Well, if you’re staying here, let’s go make some food.’ He glanced at the window and flinched at the sound of tyres screeching and people shouting. ‘Quietly, though.’

They spent the rest of the evening hiding out in the converted basement room. They had the TV on low, the blind down and lights off. They watched some anime to try to relax, but neither of them could. Even with all the doors and windows in the house locked, it was hard to feel safe when they could hear people screaming outside.

Neither of them slept that night. Although they hadn’t agreed to staying up all night, it was the natural thing to do. Instead, they stayed in the basement, chatting infrequently; they were both exhausted from long weeks at work, but how could they sleep now? Alice was just relieved that she hadn’t had to journey home.

As the pink and orange morning arrived and weak light tried to seep through the curtains upstairs, Nick carefully peeked outside. It was quieter now, but it wasn’t good out there.

The house across the road had smashed windows on every floor. Cars were damaged, their windows smashed and tyres slashed, broken glass was glistening in the road from broken bottles and, most unsettlingly of all, the puddles that adorned the pavement seemed to have red tints to them.

Alice stood anxiously waiting, watching Nick’s movements intently. He was tense, careful. She was absolutely exhausted and terrified. Nick was always calm and rational, always thinking

things through instead of panicking and making rash decisions. Although it had been an awful night, Alice was glad to be with her friend.

‘So... What’s happening out there?’

Stepping away from the curtains, Nick sighed. ‘Can’t really tell. It’s quiet, but it’s a mess. I think we’re going to have to go out and see.’

Alice nodded grimly. ‘Check the news first?’

‘I already did,’ he sighed. ‘Can’t get anything to work. Internet is down, TV, everything. Can’t even get signal for my phone. Not much we can do.’

‘Okay. Let’s go.’

Quickly and quietly they darted down the street, dodging and dashing behind cars and trees, trying to stay out of sight. Alice splashed through a puddle and the splatter marks that now adorned her blue jeans were red. Both of them noticed, but neither of them said anything. Alice felt sick.

They came to a main road with a large clocktower on an island in the middle of it. Normally it was a little dirty, but nothing compared to this. Nick gasped and Alice teared up at the wreckage in front of them.

Upended cars, a trashed motorcycle, smouldering wreckage. The normally light grey clocktower was now splashed with a dirty red colour, as if someone had launched a can of reddish-brown paint at it. On the road surrounding the tower, in between the cars and devastation, bodies tangled together, glossy eyes staring around them unseeing. The smell was unlike anything either of them had ever smelled before, the smell of petrol and smoke and blood and death. Nick turned away; the colour drained from his cheeks. Alice finally gave in to her weak stomach and threw up in the gutter, her eyes watering uncontrollably. Somewhere close, the pair heard a

loud bang, followed by a scream. A car alarm sounded. It wasn't over. It was just that most of the crowd was now dead.

Tears welling in his eyes, Nick took a deep breath. It was okay to cry, especially given the circumstances, but not right now. He had to think. They had to move.

Alice put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. 'C'mon. Let's get back to yours.'

They darted back in silence, all the while anxiously glancing around for the sources of the angry sounds they could hear around them. Aware and alert, they kept their guard up, both focussed on this one simple task of getting back to the house, as if their lives depended on it. . . For all they knew, they did.

Finally home, Nick locked the front door and put the chain on. He rubbed his temples and closed his eyes for a moment; maybe this was a bad dream, maybe he'd wake up in a second in his warm bed and this would all just be an awful dream, soon to be forgotten, like sand seeping through fingers.

Alas, he did not wake up. Instead, the roar of incensed people outside became louder, closer. Alice shuddered.

What was she to do? She was miles from home, she had barely anything with her and she had no way of knowing if her family was safe. Her girlfriend, Hayley, would be worried sick. Had she even told her she was coming to see Nick? It had been such a quick, spur of the moment decision and Hayley had already made other plans. . . Perhaps she had. No use worrying about it, or her, now. Alice reassured herself that she was fine, that Hayley was fine, she'd be at home with her parents and her dog, she'd be safe and protected. Still, the awful possibilities of where she could be and what could have happened to her would not leave her mind. She shook her head. She couldn't panic now.

‘Okay, so what’s the plan?’ asked Alice. ‘What’s the next step, Nick?’

‘We have to get out of here. Somewhere away from people where we can hide for a bit. This will all be over soon but until then, we have got to get away.’

Alice nodded.

‘Where can we go?’

‘I know a place.’

They packed a couple of bags as quickly as they could. Changes of clothes, blankets and food; no more than they would need for a couple of days. Then, nervous and silent, they crept out of the house.

They hurried along the street, keeping quiet and close to the shadows. They turned down quiet back streets and alley ways, through an abandoned factory and eventually came to a quiet, narrow lane. The midday sun was high in the sky, illuminating everything in a hazy glow. Normally Alice loved weather like this. Today it just made her feel exposed and vulnerable, like she had nowhere to hide.

They could see clearly along the entire lane. On one side, there was a high, red brick wall, adorned with ivy and shrubbery; on the other, there was a pretty river, gently flowing and meandering next to the dirt path the lane was made up of. There wasn’t another person in sight. Relieved, they strode purposefully forwards.

They walked quietly, both deep in thought, until they came to a bridge. Crossing over it and into a slightly overgrown field, they were now a decent way away from town; they had been walking for a couple of hours at least. They crossed the field, picking their way through the thistles and weeds, until they finally came to their destination.

‘Well, it’s remote,’ murmured Alice.

It was an old, stone outbuilding, looking like it had once belonged to some ancient farm. A heavy wooden door, somehow miraculously still on its hinges, was partially open.

Inside, the strong stone walls had kept the sun out and it was mercifully cooler. The floor was no more. Now, it was just dry dirt underfoot. The windows had no panes in them, but they were small and high. No one would be able to get through them. There were no inside walls here, no upper floor, but the roof was still somehow intact, great wooden beams high above their heads supporting it.

At one end, a heavy oak table stood on its side. Together, Alice and Nick pushed the table to the door, barricading it shut. It didn’t look like anyone had been here in years; there was no graffiti or litter, no sign of human life at all.

‘We should be safe here for a couple of days.’

Alice smiled a sad smile. How would they know when it was safe to go home? What would they do if things weren’t better in a day or two? Still, they were alive, and they weren’t out screaming and setting cars alight, so all was not lost.

‘We’ll stay here for a couple of days then we’ll head back. It’ll be over by then.’

‘And if it’s not?’

‘It will be.’

Alice rubbed her eyes. She was tired and irritated.

‘I know mate.’ Nick pulled a blanket out of his bag and laid it on the floor. ‘I’ll keep an eye out. You sleep. I’ll wake you up when I get tired, okay?’

Alice didn’t need telling twice. Nick had barely finished talking and she had thrown herself down on the soft, warm blanket, not even stopping to take off her shoes. She was fast asleep in moments.

He would let her sleep for as long as possible. There was no point in him even trying. He was tired, exhausted even, but with everything that was going on, he wouldn't be sleeping for a while. He checked his phone; still no signal and the battery was getting low. He turned it off. It had been a long time since he had been cut off like this. No PC, no phone, no Twitter or Twitch or Instagram... No way of knowing who was safe and who wasn't. No way of knowing who was with the angry mob out there and who had fallen victim to them. No way to know why this was happening.

It had been such a long, difficult year already and this was just one last ridiculous thing to add to the ever-growing stress everyone had been feeling. Still, it helped to put things into context, at least. Suddenly, work wasn't the most stressful thing in the world anymore. He smiled. There was a bitter irony about that, somehow.

The hours ticked past. The sun was slowly getting lower in the sky and Alice was still sound asleep. She had clearly needed it. Nick was about to wake her up when suddenly, he heard a small, scared voice from outside.

'Help.'

One word. Just one, single, solitary, sad word. Someone was out there. Someone was alone.

'Who's there?'

No answer. Nick began to wonder if he'd imagined it, but no, again, there, quietly calling through the barricaded door. 'Please! Help!'

Nick gently nudged Alice with his foot. Dazed and confused she awoke, unsure for a second where she was or why she was on the floor, but then it all came flooding back to her and she wished she didn't have to wake up at all.

'Okay, I'm awake, what—'

'SHHH!'

Again, from outside, the voice cried, louder and more desperate this time.

'What the fuck?'

Nick shrugged. Together, they slowly moved the barricade and gently swung the door open. It was just a kid. He was maybe thirteen or fourteen years old, dirty blonde hair, freckles, and big, terrified brown eyes.

'Oh my God, come in,' said Alice.

'Alice...'

'He's just a kid.'

The boy entered, wringing his hands anxiously, his eyes darting to each corner of the room. Nick frowned. He wasn't a monster. He would never leave someone to suffer out there, but something didn't feel right about this. Alice went to push the barricade back, but he shook his head.

'We might need to leave quickly.'

Alice rolled her eyes and shook her head. Given everything that was going on, of course she knew to be careful, but this was just a child.

'Where did you come from?' Nick asked.

'Town.'

'Where are your parents?'

'I dunno. Is it just you two here?'

'Why?'

'Just wondering. It is though, ain't it?'

Nick raised his eyebrows at Alice who shrugged.

'No. Our friends are around.'

Alice nodded in agreement. 'Yeah, they'll be back soon.'

'How many are there? What they got?'

'You're asking a lot of questions.' Nick watched the boy intently. 'What's your name? How did you get here? Why did you come? What happened to you?'

'Tyler. Walked. Obvious really, ain't it? I didn't want to die back there. And what happened to me is probably the same as what happened to you two. But I ain't welcome here, am I? I'm just gonna go.'

Nick laughed out loud. 'Mate, I'm not stupid. You're casing the place, aren't you?'

Tyler's eyes went wide. 'Dunno what you're talking about.'

'Sure. And while you're at it, I suppose you're all alone, just a kid who needed help, being turned away by mean strangers, right? As if. We've got nothing for you to steal.'

The boy bolted for the door and before they could stop him, he was shouting, incoherently screaming, loud enough to hear for miles around. Alice sprinted out after him before Nick could stop her, and—

BANG.

Blood.

So much blood.

Oh God! How could one person have this much blood inside them, how could one tiny bullet cause all this mess? The grass isn't green now it's red, red, red like the clocktower and the puddles were, why is everything red now—

Sirens.

Finally. In the distance, sirens. Nick was blind to the madness going on around him, the crowd that had seemingly appeared from nowhere, the shouting and the anger and the bloodshed as people fought and swore and ran. He was focussed on his friend, his friend who was bleeding and wasn't waking up, but then he heard the sirens, for the first time since this had all started.

He held a hoody against Alice's wound to stop the bleeding with one hand and with the other he turned his phone on. He could see she was still breathing, her chest shallowly rising and falling. He could pick out the odd word from the crowd now, slurs mainly. The crowd had been spurred on by something, there was a collective anger here, but why? These were questions for later. His phone finally powered on, and he teared up with relief as he saw the signal bars, finally, miraculously, full. Forcing back his tears he dialled 999.

SIX MONTHS LATER.

'I beat you! I finally beat you!'

Alice was wide eyed and thrilled, nearly throwing her controller with excitement. Nick shook his head, smirking.

'Let you mate.'

'You did not! Wait... Did you?'

Nick laughed as he shook his head. 'Nah mate, you did it. Told you that you were getting better. You just have the best coach is all.'

'Oh, shut up.'

'You're right, coach is the wrong word... Mentor? Sensei? God of all game knowledge?'

'You're such a dick.'

'Yeah, I know.'

They laughed together. Alice winced slightly and held her side; the bullet had miraculously done no lasting damage but every now and then, there was a twinge to remind her how lucky she was to be alive. Nick noticed but didn't mention it. She hated it when people mentioned it. She still hadn't talked about that day and he wouldn't make her. All she had said was thank you for saving her life, which was quite a lot to say, really.

The day that that politician had been arrested had been a bit-sweet day. It was good that finally, someone was being held to account for riling people up. He had given a speech, encouraging people to take to the streets and demand 'their country back', he had encouraged the violence and the murder and the blood. He had already garnered quite a following with his angry rhetoric before that day and he had finally decided to put his influence to use. So many people had died that day and so many people had taken part; true colours had been shown. Some people had got involved just to bask in the carnage, not really knowing what they were rioting for.

Now though, people had had enough. The days and weeks that had followed had seen a much more peaceful and proactive movement; angry friends and relatives of the dead took to the streets now, but they refused to sink to the levels that had been on display. There were strikes and pickets, there were demands and meetings, until finally enough people were taking part that no one could ignore it anymore. Property was damaged, but never, ever the people.

Change was coming.

JOSH H PHELPS

*Mitch & The Birds*

Snowfall had begun earlier that day – the runaway sun was far out of sight by the time Tony had reached the bus shelter in front of Clintons and the high street was powdered like a sponge cake. The freezing cold throbbed with the night wind and howled like a mountain lion. The muddy grime of the pavement was choked beneath the snow, but still visible through the thinner patches and through Tony's fresh boot prints trailing towards the bus shelter. The orderly flood of amber streetlights was disturbed by the white luminescent light from under the bus shelter, which seemed a little blue in contrast. The border separating where snow couldn't reach beneath the shelter mimicked the shelter's shadow, it cast a clear line with sharp corners between the painfully cold and the miserably cold.

There was some graffiti on the acrylic walls of the shelter: '*cheezy*' in thick black marker; '*Mark x Jess*' scratched in carefully; a passionate attempt to tear through '*Jess*' with an inferior tool; a couple of penises. '*Skabbo's Boys*' was by far the biggest, but it was written on the outside, so Tony couldn't read it from the corner he'd crammed himself into. Tony's face was shelled like a clam between the collar of his exhausted parka and his burgundy beanie, revealing only his boney cheeks, narrow nomad eyes and a few licks of greasy hair taped to his temples. He folded his legs, clutched onto his rucksack and gig bag, tucked his hands under his armpits, furrowed his brow, breathed hot air into his coat, but there was only so much Tony could do to keep warm. So he shuddered as he waited, his stare fixed down the barrel of an empty road.

Tony flicked an arm out and squinted at his digital watch – 03:14 – he looked up to the bus countdown – \*\*\*\*\* – broken.

He huffed. A flock of pigeons huddled and glared down upon him from the rooftop across the street, shrunk into themselves and puffed out their ruffled necks, but Tony could only make out shapes from the shine of their waxy feathers. He shivered, glanced at his watch again – still 03:14 – and mumbled, ‘*might as well*’. His thimble fingers were completely numb, the fingerless gloves and leathery calluses helped a little as he fumbled around with the rucksack zip. Finally, with a careful but stern tug, the zip groaned open enough for Tony to stuff his hand inside and, after much foraging, pull out a McDonald’s hamburger. The wrapper rustled all the way, from the moment Tony got his hand on it to the moment he stuffed it in his pocket with one hand as he pushed the last bite into his mouth with the other. He took it slow, savouring each mouthful like it was his last (especially the ones with a gherkin slice), yet he was left swallowing a stiff, resounding disappointment. The words weren’t there in his head but he felt like there should’ve been more, like he was promised more, like he deserved a little more burger. He huffed.

There was a clacking sound, if marbles could hit each other gently they would sound similar to what was approaching Tony. But he could recognise the sound of slightly overgrown claws on pavement from a mile away, and sure enough a dog with grubby hazel fur that caved in a little where a collar should have been and starry-night eyes had materialised under the shelter. Though the wind bullied its fur the dog stood perfectly still, staring at Tony with its big wet eyes so hard he could see the word ‘*please*’ flashing through his mind.

‘Sorry mate, there’s nothing left. See.’ Tony reached towards the dog with the empty wrapper, but the moment he began to lean forward it scuttled backwards and, without any more noise than the scratching of its paws on the dusted pavement, bolted down

the alley next to the Clintons. Tony huffed and shivered. The birds observed the commotion from atop their keep, he could make out their glossed beady eyes now. He couldn't remember where he had heard the phrase, *'The eyes are the window to the soul'*, yet he could tell from their eyes exactly what those birds were thinking.

Tony huffed and flipped the birds off, then quickly retracted his hand back under his armpit when the icy air started pricking at his exposed fingertip. He looked up and down the ghost high street, then at his watch again – 03:19 – then to the end of the road, then at the countdown display – \*\*\*\*\* – still broken, then back to the end of the road.

He turned to the alley next to the Clintons, staring long and hard into the frozen dark. Nothing. He went back to his rucksack and repeated the same numb fumbling as before, pulling out another McDonald's hamburger. Tony tilted his head, peeking at the alley through the corner of his eye as he peeled back the crinkling wrapper. Nothing. He rustled it back and forth like a flipbook, it couldn't possibly rustle any louder. Still nothing. Tony huffed. The birds were still watching as he shivered and bit into the second burger. He knew, but he kept his head down. He swallowed, then huffed again, then went for another bite. There was another huff nearby. Tony's head shot up mid-bite, leaving a streak of ketchup on his chin. The dog was back, with the same hypnotic glassy-eyed look on its face as before. Tony chuffed. He tore off a piece of burger. The dog sat almost immediately. He checked the burger for any gherkin slices before holding it out, making sure to move less snappishly this time. Without breaking its stare, the dog sniffed the piece and gently took it from Tony's hand before trotting back off to the alley next to the Clintons. Tony huffed. It was a shame, the dog's warm breath felt quite nice on his hand. He shivered, checked

his watch – 03:22 – and looked up at the birds. There were a few more of them now, still watching, still judging.

He looked to the end of the road and took another bite. He looked to the alley next to the Clintons. The dog plodded out of the shadows, still looking sorry for itself but a little less so, and came back under the bus shelter. Tony relented and gave the last bite to the dog, but only because it was sitting again. The dog stayed this time, lowering its head and wincing as it snapped up the bite.

‘You like that?’

The dog looked up with its feet glued in place. A bold ‘yes’ to Tony.

‘Well, there’s plenty more where that came from.’ He winked and reached inside his rucksack, pulling out another McDonald’s hamburger. ‘I buy them in bulk.’ They shared the burger as Tony explained his scheme. ‘Well, not exactly “in bulk”, more like half-a-dozen at a time. That way I can keep my breaks short and my stomach full. Now, I know what you’re thinking and I completely agree: Cheeseburgers are way better, but when you’re short on cash then ten pence saved can really make a difference, ‘cause it adds up over time, y’know? Every penny counts. Especially on weekdays, when money comes in a little slower. I’m a busker, so income’s a bit... temperamental, to say the least.’

Tony noticed the dog didn’t have a collar, ‘I’ve never met a stray who knows how to sit. You lost?’ He reached to pet the dog on the head, but it jumped back and its eyes grew a little whiter.

‘Sorry, mate.’ He understood, and offered it another bite of burger. ‘My name’s Tony. You got a name?’ The dog silently came forward and took it.

‘Hmm,’ Tony watched it eat. ‘How about Mitch? Yeah, you look like a Mitch.’

Mitch perked up at the sound of its new name, almost like it was right.

‘How’d you end up here, Mitch? Haven’t you got a home to go to? You the same as me then, you can’t go home cause the home don’t want you anymore? Or you don’t want the home anymore. Yeah, I suppose life can get pretty rough, Mitch. Not that you don’t know that, of course. Sometimes you just can’t catch a break from the moment you’re born. Not me though, I started out alright. I had a nice home, and a nice family, friends could’ve used some improvement but they weren’t too bad overall. I just fell in with the wrong crowd, that’s all. I know, it sounds a little cliché, and it is very cliché, but that really is the best way I can describe it. I’m good now though. That’s why I’m here, to see if I can get a second chance. I reckon it started when we were out and about this one time, we were kicking a drink can around, cherry coke, I think, and one of us kicked it a little too hard, wasn’t me, I think. And you know what happened next?’

He drew an arc with his finger slowly across the air with a descending whistle that sounded like a bomb falling from the sky. He mimicked an explosion with his hands and with his voice.

‘Smashed straight through Mrs Walt’s window!’ He let out a proud little chuckle. ‘Ah, you should’ve seen it. Glass and foam everywhere, you could’ve heard the crash for miles.’

He could still see the birds from the corner of his eye, still watching, still judging.

‘We ran like hell, but we got found out eventually. Got a pretty bad telling-off and got grounded for a week and got no pocket-money for a month. Yeah, I know “grounded” is a silly little American word but that’s what happened, but then again that’s not what’s important. What was important was the bloody

*adrenaline* and *dopamine* and whatever it's called. That moment gave me such a rush, everything else I used to do just seemed so boring. I started off small of course, shoplifting sweets and sexy magazines from corner shops, and just a little harmless vandalism. Then I started smoking behind the bins at school, I had a friend whose brother would sell them to us till he got caught and ratted us out. You should've seen how red my mum face was, Mitch. She went white as all this snow a few years later, when she found out I was on something worse. I promised I would stop and she believed me, and I did stop for a while, but then things started going missing and she knew why, so then...'

Tony looked back up that the birds and shivered. They were still watching, always judging. Mitch looked at them too.

Tony turned back to Mitch. 'I'm getting the next bus home. I'm clean now, I've been clean for years. Do you think she'll believe me, Mitch? Do you think they'll take me back?' Mitch looked up at him, as hungry as he always looked. 'I'll be honest with you though, sleeping rough isn't really the problem. I'm just, lonely, y'know? I guess I don't deserve forgiveness, but I miss my family. Whether they miss me is another question entirely though. Actually, I take back what I said earlier. I didn't fall in with the wrong crowd, I followed the wrong crowd. I don't know, it just sounded wrong when I said it, that's all. Busking's kind of fun, actually, now that I think about it.'

Bright blue beams of light brushed past Tony's eyes as the bus came into view at the end of the road. He turned to Mitch, 'Well, this is me. Thanks for listening Mitch. You've been great.' He turned away and picked up his belongings, pulling the rucksack around himself and slinging the gig bag on his shoulder. He looked at Mitch, still sitting with his big sad eyes glued on him. He huffed, shakily.



The bus pulled in and the driver opened the door. Tony shivered and looked at Mitch, pausing with one foot through the door. Mitch sat again.

When the sun came up, the birds were still waiting, looking down at the paw-prints leading away from the bus shelter, and the boot-prints beside them.



MELISSA RUSSELL

*Document Room*

ROOM POV

I always watch them out of the corner of my view. Two small figures, wrapped in fragile flesh, cut easily by the pointed edges of cardboard pushed against me, minimising my six walls of sight. It's lonely here with the distant sound of laughter, becoming my own warm embrace. I saw them do that once, water tipped from the smaller one's eyes as arms were raised to push away, and legs used to walk to one of the holes in me, and look out, watching life, that is forever out of my view. I watched this one repeat that every day, with the same strange look of calmness in the eyes. I kept my sight close to them, hoping to see a reflection of light, joy, anything from the world beyond; but the eyes were never brought close enough to me. I counted the passage of time by the creases that grew around them and by the new cardboard that brought their weary laughter inside me. The cardboard was opened by them in a glint of silver, to pull and whip at squares of white fur greyed by dust. They placed it at the centre bottom of me, and I observed with curiosity as they did this again and again and again, filling me to the brink of space with white painted wood drawers, plastic rainbows wrapped around themselves and small ladders, to climb up and pierce me, stuffing my flesh with strings spun with music, until finally with exertion presented to me in grunts a white open box of wooden bars was pulled through me, onto the fur. It was still now, quiet in loneliness with the small one who had stopped walking to the whole, and instead decided to stare at the white bared box, with a hand absentmindedly stroking the growing stomach.

A few times during these moments, I thought I saw in the particle light, the very same tip of water I saw those days ago. Then one day the small one wasn't alone.

Cradled in arms, was a mass of screaming white cloth that was placed in the box. I moved above, watching as the small one just looked at it for a second, then a minute, and maybe an hour. It just screamed louder and louder, until I could feel it, reverberating around the dusty particles of light. It ducked, moved, and weaved before bumping into me, no, creasing me. This was an embrace. This was beautiful.

The small one picked the creature up, and pressed it to the growing body, in its own hug, and crouched in infinitesimal inches, as it patted the back of the creature, till the screaming, slowed like death into silence. Why did it stop? The creature was put back into the box, and there I saw, little fragile flesh, peeking out from the cloth. It was a tiny one. A now quite tiny one. How did I get it to scream? I sent my mind across my sight, feeling the paint and plaster of my own clothes, hoping that ideas would bloom in their cover-up, but they didn't. My mind was silent, and so was the little one. I moved deeper until I felt my skeleton of wood underneath. I flicked at it, my own soothing gestures as I thought; then I stopped and flicked it harder till it pulsated in a bang.

Scream.

Bang.

Scream.

I was wrong. This wasn't a warm embrace, our bodies did not touch, yet our voices did in an exchange of syllables. The small one came back with hardened steps and grabbed the baby to walk out, but that didn't matter. I was wrong. This was a conversation.

Time passed for me in light and screams, as we learned each other. My top made the tiny one yelp in a high-pitched squeal, while my left drew out a longer lower note, still pitched up at the ends. I learned and learned and learned until there was nothing left to do but to change the name of the tiny one to 'my friend'.

I didn't look at the small one anymore; not when I didn't need to; in the tiny seconds she was there, she brought me the greatest loneliness and respite. In the moments where the light was clear of particles and beat down heavy the small one would be there, taking my friend away. But in the other moments, when that one returned, my friend would be back, silenced. It wasn't until the air around me was sucked of light that I realised the small one was behind time. There was no mark, no noise, as the light remained fixed in that eternal darkness; but then the small one came.

My friend was pressed to the chest, a new colour bleeding into the white cloth wrapped around it, and for once I found myself curious about the small one again. I looked at the eyes, the ones I used to know daily, with every shade and glint of light from the outside, but now when I looked, I only saw creases. Had it really been that long? So long that the small one's creases had turned to black smudges drawn underneath the eyes. My friend was placed back into the box, and with the same stroke completed on the night of me and my friend's first meeting, the small one left the room.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

The only screams I heard were outside me, but I remained silent. I drew myself above my friend.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

The tall one came in, a white plastic bag in one hand, and the other hand free. My friend was grabbed and stuffed in the plastic before walking out of the room, leaving me to my loneliness.

MADELINE SALTER

*You, Me and the Sea*

Sea scud and beer-fuelled laughter floated on the night air to where she stood in the alley beside the pub. The streetlamp's honey-warm light bathed the pavement in front of her, but she kept hidden in the shadows. Her fingers, numb from the English summer, fumbled for a loose cigarette.

Snippets of conversations carried over the pub's pebbled wall; she could pick out the voices of friends that she had known as long as she had known herself. All so soothing in their familiarity.

Her bare shoulders pressed against the cool, filthy brick, head lolling back with a thud, before she flicked the near-empty lighter. It singed the edges of the already blackened night, then flickered out. She tried again, rolling her thumb across the harsh heat of the metal. It flamed again but just as quickly was snuffed out by darkness. Over and over her thumb rolled, the skin becoming tender, the sound of the spark catching echoing in the alley.

'Thought I'd find you out here.'

She almost dropped the lighter as the noise burst her quiet side-alley bubble.

'You disappeared on us,' he said.

The diphthongs of his voice washed over her like the river they grew up beside.

There was a comfort in its flow; but she knew, after everything, to be wary of the currents underneath it, no matter how desperate she was to wade into the depths of him.

'Well, here I am,' she said, her voice tart.

She tried the lighter again.

‘It’s good to see you, Fi.’

Her hand stilled. The salted, brisk evening coated the papillae of her tongue.

‘Yeah, well,’ she sighed. ‘It’s always good to see you, Jack, isn’t it?’ She put the unlit cigarette to her lips. ‘That’s the problem.’

The hairs on her arms stood in protest of the biting breeze. They both stilled, caught in a standoff that she wanted to run from. She flicked the lighter again; finally, the flame caught the frayed edges of her cigarette.

Gulls flying overhead laughed at them – at the painful silence between them – and over the wall, bassy roaring and guffawing reverberated through the night. She wished she had stayed in the small beer garden, amongst the safe huddle of their friends. Around them, this conversation would never have had to happen. They could go on pretending – she’d be happy to. Eventually, the feelings would pass; eventually, she would stop wanting to reach her hand out to him. Eventually felt a long way off.

She waited. He waited. Theirs was a play where no one had bothered to learn the lines, lines they had always managed to ad-lib so easily, before now. Here – in the alley between the pub where they’d had their first, legal, drink and the old chippy – their words seemed to be stuck behind their teeth, their tongues not managing to haul them out.

She drew in another burnt mouthful of tobacco smoke.

‘Since when were you a smoker?’

As if on cue, her lungs protested. In spits and spurts, charred air billowed from her, clouding his face.

‘Ah, you know, desperate times and all that,’ she wheezed.

She tried again, and this time, the smoke settled in her. It numbed nerve endings that had always felt too friable around him.

She tapped the end, sending sparks flying only to fizzle as they met the ground. Together, they watched them extinguish.

In the distance, beyond the row of houses behind the pub, the sea crashed onto stones, dragging them back into its bowels. She could hear the clatter from where she stood, she only wished it could be louder; loud enough to drown out the siren that sung of the past.

‘It’s been a while,’ he murmured.

It was that low, soft tone that had always made her melt. It reminded her of freshly ploughed soil and molten marmalade sunsets slathered onto the horizon: warm and earthy. She could practically taste its thickness at the back of her throat – feel it pooling in her gut.

His eyes were everywhere; darting across her hand that gripped her cigarette so hard it had lost its shape; resting on her bony knees that he’d mocked since they were little; lingering on the angry pink sunburn that had blossomed across her chest. She refused to meet his gaze.

‘I guess it has,’ her voice was raspy – strained.

‘How have you—’

‘I actually came out here to get some quiet, Jack.’ His brows furrowed.

‘OK.’

He dragged the sound out before dropping it in the silence; the plop of a pebble in smooth waters.

Crumbling cement went bouncing further into the dim alley as his foot kicked at the ground. He looked like the little boy she had grown up with. It made her want to soften towards him and, for a moment, she trailed her gaze across his shoes, to his waist, his chest, neck – but before they could make the final dash towards his face, she dragged them away. No. Not tonight. Cider had made her nostalgic

and, around him, nostalgia was dangerous. It was rich on her tongue like a too-sweet syrup; but, despite the toothache, she longed to keep guzzling the memories down. The streetlamp flickered; a car whooshed past, its headlights momentarily throwing them both into a harsh blue glare. She felt his stare as he calculated her, adding up thoughts she knew her face betrayed, so easy for him to read.

He paced in front of her, knocking at the loose brick of the dilapidated chip shop or nudging at the gravel on the floor, glancing at her every few seconds.

She lifted the cigarette to her lips once more. He heaved a breath. He was grating on her, slowly riling her up; she knew he was doing it on purpose, goading a reaction from her – he never could bear silence.

Through bared teeth, she said, 'What?'

His face lit up at the singular syllable of noise. He shrugged. 'Nothing.'

'No, go on, what is it?'

He stopped fidgeting.

'It doesn't suit you. Smoking.'

'It's not exactly a fashion statement, Jack.'

'You told me it was a filthy habit; in fact, you dobbed me into my Mum when I tried it once.'

'You were thirteen, you shouldn't start smoking at thirteen,' she groaned in despair, although she wasn't able to stop the smile that teased the corners of her mouth. 'And you shouldn't start smoking at twenty-two.' She let out a snort, he grinned at the noise, and that damn smile threatened to wear her down. 'Maybe you're right,' she relented.

'Always am, Fi.'

She was sure her eyes rolled almost to her hairline.

He leant against the pub wall across from her and, for the first time that evening, she felt he was far enough away for her to breathe.

‘Anyway, why do you care if I smoke?’

‘Ah, you know me, I like to look out for my friends.’ She flinched, as if he’d kicked the gravel into her face, wiping away the inkling of the smile that had been creeping up on her. ‘What?’ he asked.

She couldn’t tell if he was probing her or whether he was, really, completely clueless.

‘Are we that, anymore?’ She tilted her head. ‘Friends, that is.’ Her voice came out cold; brisk and choppy like the river in Autumn. ‘You know, after everything that happened last year.’

His smile dropped. Eyes narrowed on her. Was this the moment in the standoff when the weapons were pulled from their holsters?

Under his inspection her skin felt itchy – unsettled; she didn’t know whether to turn her forehead against the cold brick or press the lit butt into her arm. As she watched him, watch her, the threat of the current grew stronger.

From the pub there was a cheer; there must have been a goal on the T.V., and suddenly, he was stalking towards her, making her feet retreat against their will.

He came closer — closer than he had been in over a year — and now she couldn’t keep her eyes from his and it felt like her skin needed to be pulled off or scratched or soothed and his hand was reaching towards her face and was he going to touch her cheek? — no, it was her mouth, he was going to touch her mou—

Calloused fingers grazed her tender lower lip as he plucked the cigarette from where it had hung. It was discarded into the darkness.

‘There, much better.’

Her shock didn’t last long, and soon, the nerves the smoke had numbed were on fire once again. ‘Hey!’

A hard shove on his shoulders sent him careening back to his side of the alley. 'You're not a smoker, Fi.'

'You don't know anything about me, anymore.'

'I know enough.'

'People change, Jack.'

'Wow, what a developmental journey you've been on. I'm so impressed with how you've evolved.'

His sarcasm had always wound her up. Years later it still got to her.

There had been times when he would do it on purpose, when he would push and push until she screeched and chased him around the school playground, or the beach, or wherever else they'd been out causing mayhem. But while she had chased him then, she had always been laughing. Now, her jaw was tight, teeth clenched.

'You've been ignoring me.' His voice was barely a whisper, it feathered across her skin.

'No, I haven't.'

'Yeah, you have, Fi. Barely said five words to me since I got here.'

She pulled the ratty sleeves of her knitted sweater over her hands, fiddling with the loose thread. The yarn gave with a light tug.

'Haven't even looked at me, really,' he said.

She could wrap it around her finger, pull it tight until the tip looked like a sausage about to burst from its casing. What would happen if she kept pulling? Would it all unravel?

'Fi, for God's sake!'

Then, his shoes were there, flush to the tips of hers, and his hands were untangling her finger. The warmth from his heaving chest lapped against the chilled skin of hers. How was it that it felt simultaneously like no time had passed – like they were right there in pink teenage years – whilst also feeling like they were careening

towards the sombre grey of adulthood. She didn't want it; didn't want the weight of life, of consequences, on her shoulders just yet. She wanted to rest her head against him and slump into arms she had felt around her a thousand times before; when they were weedy and scrawny, then bouncy with un-hardened muscle, then firm from time spent living.

But instead of falling forward, she leant back into the safety of the wall, because there were no repercussions there.

'I thought you said we were OK?' he said.

Her teeth nibbled at her peeling lip where she'd scorched it in the sun that day. 'I thought we were. I did. I thought it would be fine, seeing you – with her – but...'. She yanked her hand from his tight grip, thrusting it into her pocket. 'It's harder than I thought.'

His shoulder pressed against hers as he leant against the greasy chip shop wall next to her. They both studied the twinkling bulbs of the pub's outdoor lights across the alley; the heat lamp that quietly gave up on its job, before being fired back into life.

'I can't just pretend it never happened,' she muttered. 'So my second option is to just, I don't know, ignore you, I guess.'

Gruffly, he said, 'I don't like that second option.'

Her head whipped round, hair lashing across his face. 'I'm not sure you get a choice,' she sniped.

The cider, all six pints of it, felt heavy in her stomach; it made her legs wooden, her lips swollen. He stared at them. She felt suspended, above what, she didn't know. Perhaps a canyon full of dust and rubble to tumble through? Or a warm pool she could languish in? Or maybe, she was only a foot from the ground, closer to safety than she realised. Caught in his gaze, it was hard to tell.

Another cheer erupted from the pub; he looked away and the tether frayed, leaving the slimmest of threads holding her up.

'I can't not have you in my life, Fi.'

His plea pressed against her chest.

'Yeah, well, I can't watch you with her whilst knowing what we did.'

She could still feel his hands biting into her, cold as frost, that Christmas. Marking her when she wasn't his to brand. She remembered being desperate to do the same but knowing that she shouldn't – she couldn't. It was a stolen moment, the punishment for which would have been brutal, should they have been discovered.

She pushed off the wall, the weight of his shoulder becoming too much.

'We talked about this. We were drunk, stupidly drunk. It happens,' he argued.

'No, Jack, it doesn't just "happen".' Her cheeks heated; if there had been light, he would've seen the redness blooming across them. He would've known to stop talking.

'But it did!' he shouted. 'And I can't get it out of my head.'

His fingers plunged into curls that had always been out of his control; he gripped them, tugging as if he could yank out the image of them together.

'I told you we shouldn't, Jack. I kept saying we couldn't do it and you didn't listen! You never listen to me!' She was aware they were yelling now, as if the alleyway could keep hold of their secrets, even when their voices bounced off the walls, echoing in the inky black.

'Oh, come off it! You never said we should stop.'

'I told you we shouldn't do it.' Her voice ground out like the churn of a cement mixer.

'Yeah, right before you kissed my fucking neck, Fi. What am I supposed to do with that?'

'I don't know, maybe stop what *you* started!'

At his side, she saw his fists clench and unclench. He took a breath.

‘It was always going to happen between us, everyone knew it would since high school.’

‘Yes. But it didn’t have to happen then, did it?’ She was panting, hot breath battling against the cool evening. She tried to let it even out. ‘You knew how I felt about you and you still let it happen. It wasn’t fair to me, Jack.’

‘Felt?’

He huffed round the word.

‘Yes. Felt.’ She wavered.

‘I don’t believe you.’

The weapons were drawn, fingers quivering on the trigger. But then he was moving closer, taking her hand and dragging her further into the darkness, closer towards the roar of the sea, away from the warm light and laughter of the pub. She let him; let her surging breath swim with his, watched as it mingled with the tangy air, before sucking it back down her throat. And now she was diving in, crashing her lips into his, letting his tongue stroke hers; they waded into the familiar waters of each other and allowed themselves to be taken under. The same protestations from before tried to burst through the rough surface of her mind, but with each tempestuous kiss, she drowned them a little more.

‘I’ve missed you,’ she managed to say around lips that were everywhere.

‘God, Fi, I’ve missed you, too.’

He sounded strained, choking on the rush of it all – of the cider and the shots of tequila they’d slammed back earlier and the taste of their mouths together that was a cocktail so familiar, yet now so foreign.

But then a sound broke through their barrier: the dull vibrations of a phone.

‘Shit,’ he said.

They broke apart, leaning heavily into the other’s body for balance. The phone stopped buzzing. His hand reached up to her face, brushing so lightly over it that all that was caressed was the soft down on her cheek.

He whispered, ‘It was always going to happen with us, Fi.’

The phone started buzzing again. She willed him, silently, to let the rings fade out but he retrieved it from his pocket. And there, in a light that was so painfully bright, was a name that snapped the tether once and for all. She could feel herself plummeting, feel her stomach protest the gravity of it all.

‘I’ve got to answer it. I’m sorry.’

She nodded.

‘Hey. Yeah, babe, I’m still here – well, I just popped to the shop, needed to grab some food, I was starving.’

His words poured out of him in a rush, a tidal wave of excuses.

‘I’ll be back in a minute – no! No, don’t come find me, I’ll be back soon. Promise.’

She wondered how many promises he’d made to the unsuspecting girl on the other end of the phone. How many he’d kept – how many she had helped him break. She took a step away. His dark irises latched on to hers; they were so, incredibly, wide. She took another step.

‘Hang on, Alice, I’ve got to go.’

She could hear the girl on the other end of the line. They’d done it again, the one mistake she’d promised herself she’d never repeat. Her head shook, a slow metronome that kept her shame in time. It pounded into her with each beat.

He reached for her, keeping her in place, and she could tell that he was trying to soothe her with just a look; one she'd dreamt about since she was thirteen, wondering how a boy's eyelashes could be so thick; one that kept her pinned in the simplicity of adolescence, in the comfort of the past.

The wind picked up again, cool air wrapping around her bare legs, sending bumps racing along her flesh. His palm, warm against hers, fought to keep the chill away.

She looked towards the street – where reality waited to pounce on them as soon as they stepped into the weak glow of the street-lamp – then to the ever-darkening path that would lead to the shoreline. All at once, she yearned to escape the consequences she knew were waiting. She wished to pretend, just for a moment longer, that the world wasn't waiting for them, that they were still in the candied world of youth.

'OK, I'll be back in a minute. Bye.'

The blanket of silence enveloped them once more as he hung up. This time, neither of them hurried to break free of it.

She waited. He waited.

The laughter and chatter from the pub seemed to dull, the gulls now cheered.

'What do we do now?'

And suddenly, the ending of their play seemed clear. She tightened her grasp on his hand, pulling him from the alley that had been their stage that night, towards the sea. And together, they retreated into the past.

HOLLIE WILSON

*When I was fifteen, all I wanted was to be seen*

When I was fifteen, all I wanted was to be seen.

My deeply disturbing desire for attention could be satiated by cursory glances, but the crestfallen expressions contorting the faces of my loved ones are what kept me going. The pity buried in their eyes validated my misery – proof of my annihilation, confirmation that it was real, that I was real. Like the wounded gaze of my best friend when I turned down lunch or the teachers' worry lines when they'd stop me after class and offer empty words of comfort.

When I was fifteen, all I wanted was to be seen.

I didn't stop to think about what this might cost people. I had no regard for anyone's feelings, least of all my own. Aside from self-destruction of the highest degree, nothing mattered anymore – not the lights on the Christmas tree, falling in love or the tattered pages of my well-loved books. I laughed in the face of every new day as soon as the moon disappeared behind the clouds and the sun feebly tried to take its place. I swallowed screams for every meal and measured the passing of time by the number of days it took me to lose somebody for good. My life became a humiliating, bruise-coloured, grief-inducing countdown. It was agonising to watch, but impossible to look away from and I know this because I had my eyes wide open the entire time.

I was sedated but awake and I could do nothing but scream.

When I was seventeen, I met the sun in the form of a girl.

Not the sun on a regular summer's day, the sun on a bleak mid-winter's afternoon, so gloriously radiant that you worry you'll never be warm again without it. When she looked at me, she didn't see a giant bruise, or a kicked puppy or a chasmic wound that would

never heal. She didn't see a cautionary tale, or a girl that was never supposed to make it off the floor. When she looked at me, she saw life. She cradled me in her arms like a newborn baby, instead of recoiling from what I thought I was: damaged beyond repair, unsalvageable, made of rot. She saw a friend, someone to confide in, someone who was just as broken as her and vowed to help me survive all the same things she never thought *she* would survive.

When I was seventeen, I met the sun in the form of a girl.

We collided as two separate stars and birthed an entirely new galaxy that was ours to explore, ours to care for, ours to expand upon. We forged a sisterhood within the flames and emerged as warriors and even when things were dark, we fought, protected, and served. This thing we created belonged to us, and even though I still wasn't entirely sure that I deserved it, I knew right away that we were bonded for life. Even hell in the form of a teenage girl isn't strong enough to rip an entire galaxy out of the sky.

Now I'm nineteen and all I want is to be seen and be loved anyway.

Long gone are my saddening and desperate pleas for attention and my selfish indifference towards other people's feelings. My pain is no longer my personality, and the days are no longer desolate. There are times when I think it would be easier to just slip back into that coma that imprisoned me for most of my adolescence, but just because something is easy doesn't mean it's something you need. I no longer find consolation in people's pity, or comfort in self-retribution. My old habits are a pair of boots that I've outgrown.

Now I'm nineteen and all I want is to be seen and be loved anyway.

For people to look at me and see all the flowers that are beginning to grow from the dirt.

Every day sounds like a Fall Out Boy song and I spend them writing because I have time to do that now I'm not so busy digging graves. She reads my poetry instead of eulogies and doesn't act like she's at my funeral whenever I'm around. I'm relieved to find that someone sees the tangled, imperfect mess of my existence and loves me *despite* it rather than *because* of it; that someone is sticking around because they want to, not because they're scared of what I'll do if they leave.

I'm not fifteen anymore.

When I turned seventeen, the sun came out. Now I'm nineteen and learning to love myself a little more every time the moon disappears, and the sun takes its place. When I'm bathed in her golden glow, the clouds don't seem so grey, and I see rainbows instead of rain. I am better than I was. I grow more and more with each and every passing day.

Love is finally enough.



#### IV. SCRIPTS



LILY DENT

*Escapism*

ACT 1, SCENE 1

CURTAINS OPEN

*A yellow light slowly increases in brightness down onto the centre stage. The stage is clear except for a black metal bench in front of a small mound of fallen auburn leaves, dirt and rubble. A looming dark tree with a few last leaves banging on to the long dipping branches hung over the mound. The light illuminates from the upper-back of the stage piercing through the tree's branches.*

*A BOY, age 8, walks in from stage right, head hung and kicking a stone. Wearing grey trousers and blazer, white shirt, red tie, red beanie, green gloves and scarf. He has a grey rectangular school bag across his shoulder.*

*He notices his shoelace is undone and when he gets close to the bench stops kicking the stone and goes to the bench. He lifts the foot with the undone lace up onto the arm of the bench and ties his shoe. Then he sits down at the end of the bench — toes just touching the floor, knees together.*

*He glances left before pulling his bag over his head and flicking it open. He pulls out a flask and drinks from it, places it beside him and retrieves a thick book from inside. It's used and visibly curved. A bookmark is placed three quarters of the way through and the boy opens it to the marked page.*

*He wiggles to get comfortable. Sits slightly hunched, with his shoulders drooping, leaning over the open book that rests on his thighs.*

*Just then the noise of a low flying aeroplane is heard overhead and a couple of leaves fall from the tree. The boy doesn't look up from his book.*

END OF SCENE

ACT 2, SCENE 1

*A red and gold eccentric wallpapered backdrop, fully lit stage. A tall, slender male in his early 40s walks on from stage left followed closely by a shorter man in his 30s. Both enter wearing full bellboy uniform in black and crimson. The elder man has a thick moustache, the younger is clean shaven.*

*Both walk in short quick rigid steps, spines straight, heads high. 'CHAPTER 24' is projected across the top of the backdrop. They are rushing.*

MARVIN The key is not to let them suspect anything. So, act as normal. Don't do that thing where your eyes go all wild.

DIMITRI My eyes, sir?

MARVIN Yes, your eyes. You have this horrid tendency to gawk and stare like an owl when you are nervous.

*(DIMITRI looks puzzled, contemplative.)*

*They exit through stage right.*

ACT 2, SCENE 2

*Backdrop lifted; the stage is now a luxurious banquet room covered with small decorated circular tables. Everyone is dressed smartly — men wearing suits and bows, women wearing dresses and feathers in their hair — some people hold champagne flutes. Everyone is chatting and a small three-piece band plays music in the left corner.*

*In the right corner is a grand staircase with a crimson rug running down it. MARVIN and DIMITRI stare down from the top of the stairs, looking at the guests. A pause is shared between them before they descend in sync.*

*At the front left of the stage a woman is sitting with her back to the audience chatting inaudibly to a man standing beside her. MARVIN and DIMITRI shuffle past the people and tables around the woman. Just as the pair are close to sneaking past the woman snaps her head directly to them.*

ANGELICA (*emphatically, but with a bitter undertone. Interrupting the man in front of her.*) Boys! I was wondering when I would see your faces. Daniel, be a darling and fetch me another glass. Such a dear, thank you.

*Once DANIEL has gone, she shifts her body towards M & D. Cross legged and glares. The audience sees the beautiful woman fully.*

ANGELICA You two look like you've had a busy day. I've hardly seen you at all. Please, sit.

*M & D look to each other before — SLAM. ANGELICA's hand lands on the table. The boys immediately fall to two nearby chairs, rigid.*

ANGELICA (*all aggression in demeanour vanished*) Actually, I've seen you a lot today. (*Twiddling her empty glass on the tablecloth.*) Yes, I've seen you both quite a bit. Well, when I say 'seen' I really mean that my ears have been listening. You see, I'm not ignorant, I know what you are up to. (*She looks at them with a sharp glare.*)

*While ANGELICA has been speaking, DIMITRI has slowly leant towards her and stuck his head out like a constipated pigeon, his eyes now bulging from their sockets. ANGELICA is unphased by DIMITRI. MARVIN does a double take of DIMITRI and looks concerned.*

ANGELICA (*pointing*) You two boys lay a finger out of line and I'll be sure to see you both sent to the pole, got it?

*DIMITRI makes a high pitch squeal, lip quivers. MARVIN quickly sweeps DIMITRI up by hooking him under the arm. DIMITRI doesn't stop staring at Angelica.*

MARVIN (*with a trace of guilt*) I'm sure you are mistaken, Miss Angelica, ma'am. Dimitri and I have no clue what you are insinuating. We have been working very hard today to guarantee the hotel is upkeeping its prestige. (*A short silence.*) Well, I'm sure you understand we must be going. Good evening, Miss. (*Marvin bowls his head.*)

MARVIN leads DIMITRI away, still linking arms. After a few feet of distance ANGELICA calls after MARVIN.

ANGELICA Oh, Marvin. Dimitri looks so pale, be sure to get him to bed. He looks positively dreadful. . . Like he's seen the dead walking.

MARVIN's face drops. They turn to retreat up the stairs, both the picture of ill health. On the third step up the stairs, MARVIN stops and holds DIMITRI's body away from him, so they are face to face.

MARVIN God damn it man. What the bloody hell is wrong with you. You might as well have collapsed dead at her feet! We may be in that state by the night's end. (He looks over his shoulder to where ANGELICA is sat.)

ANGELICA (to the returned DANIEL) Thank you, darling. (Sips from the glass.) Let's dance, shall we? (DANIEL leads her towards the band.)

MARVIN turns back to DIMITRI, who is still in shock. MARVIN slaps him square across the face. DIMITRI yelps and puts his hand to his cheek. They ascend the stairs.

DIMITRI God damn it, Marv – I mean sir – she's onto us. What happens now? What do we do?

MARVIN We stick to the plan. If we move quickly we could still catch the train.

DIMITRI Oo, a penny.

DIMITRI leans down on the stairs to pick up the penny, right in the way of MARVIN. MARVIN then stumbles over DIMITRI and subsequently begins to tumble down the stairs. He grabs DIMITRI's collar and they fall together.

Everyone except ANGELICA looks in M & D's direction, where they now groan on the floor.

LIGHTS OUT, END SCENE

ACT 2, SCENE 3

*The wallpapered backdrop again. 'CHAPTER 25' is projected across the top of the backdrop. M & D enter from stage right and make their way across the stage. MARVIN is limping but still maintains his rigid posture. DIMITRI's posture is not as it was, he walks more casually, out of step with MARVIN. They are rushing.*

DIMITRI (*halfway across the stage*) Sir, perhaps we should—

LIGHTS OUT, END OF SCENE

ACT 3, SCENE 1

*The same scene as in Act 1, Scene 1. Exactly as it was left, but the boy is sat cross legged on the bench now, still hunched over his lap with the book in it.*

*A sheet of fog lies over the mound, an orange and pink light shining from the stalls. A breeze makes more leaves fall to the ground, only one hangs on.*

*A MOTHER enters from stage left. Her DAUGHTER, age 8, wearing a similar uniform to the boy, skips on after her and overtakes. She notices the boy on the bench and goes over to him. Only when the girl speaks does the mother notice and turn back towards the bench. They're Ukrainian.*

DAUGHTER Привіт, що ти робиш? Читання? (Hello, what are you doing? Reading?)

THE BOY Читання. (Reading.)

MOTHER Крихітко, що ти робиш? Читання? Давай. Йди додому, ти тут не в безпеці. Мама буде хвилюватися. Приходь. (Baby, what are you doing? Reading? Come on. Go home, you are not safe out here. Mummy will be worrying. Come.)

*The MOTHER starts walking away again.*

DAUGHTER Приходь. Давайте йти додому. (Come. Let's go home.)

THE BOY (*sighs*) Я чекаю тата. (I'm waiting for Daddy.)

*THE BOY puts his bookmark in his book, book in the bag, cap back on the flask, flask in bag, bag back on shoulder and stands small. THE MOTHER walks off stage right. THE DAUGHTER takes the hand of the boy and drags him off stage, following the mother.*

*The stage is left still for a minute. The light is dimming. All is quiet.*

*But after this long silence, mechanical clanks sound from the distance. A tank thundering forward echoes throughout and gunfire sounds.*

*Then nothing.*

*Lights go out.*

LAURA EVANS

*The perfect couple*

*Lights up. RICHARD'S library, 11pm. Faint sounds of music and laughter come from the door stage left. It is dark, except from the moonlight coming in from the window stage right. A silhouette is seated on a sofa by the window, MAGNUS DEWITT, the light of his cigarette stands out against the darkness. The door opens and in walks MARGO HAMILTON. She closes the door with a sigh, leaning against it. She gulps down the glass of wine and notices the silhouette the other side of the room.*

MARGO Who's there?

MAGNUS reaches to a side table and flicks on the lamp, making MARGO jump.

MARGO Oh! Magnus!

MAGNUS God! My dear Margo, are you yet living!

MARGO What are you doing here?

MAGNUS I could ask you the same question.

MARGO I asked first.

MAGNUS The same reason as you I suspect.

MARGO Which is?

MAGNUS A break from the party.

MARGO No. You know what I mean. What are you doing *here*, at *Richard's* party?

MAGNUS I'm in the new play.

MARGO Impossible. You can't be.

MAGNUS And why, Miss Hamilton, would it be impossible?

MARGO Because, Mr Dewitt, *I'm* in the new play, and Richard wouldn't dare cast *us* together.

MAGNUS Well, dare he has. (*MARGO throws her glass near him. MAGNUS feigns pain.*) I say, that was a tad over dramatic.

MARGO I don't believe you.

MAGNUS That's your problem.

MARGO This is some sort of joke. (*They stare at each other intensely. MARGO realises he's not joking.*) I'm going to kill Richard!

*She goes back to the door, but it doesn't open. The door is stuck. They are both trapped in the room. She struggles to open the door, her movements sharp.*

MAGNUS (*twiddling with his lighter, his back to MARGO*) What have you done?

MARGO What have *I* done? I've done nothing. This stupid door won't open!

MAGNUS Are you pulling a push door?

MARGO If you think you're so clever, why don't you come over here and do it yourself? (*MAGNUS reluctantly gets up and struts over to the door. He tries it. Tries again. His breathing quickens. He yanks at the handle.*) Oh my god, stop. You're going to make it worse. (*As she says this, the door handle comes off into MAGNUS's hand.*) Congratulations.

MAGNUS No. No, no, no, no! (*MARGO bangs on the door and shouts for help.*) No use. They're all on the other side of the house with the loud music.

*MARGO takes the handle from MAGNUS and bits him on the arm with it.*

MARGO You idiot!

MAGNUS Ummm, ow. You're the one who last entered the room.

*MAGNUS takes the handle back from her and puts it in his pocket.*

MARGO So it's my fault?

MAGNUS Yes.

MARGO Says the man, holding the broken door handle.

MAGNUS What about our phones?

*MARGO goes to get her phone out of her pocket but can't find it. MAGNUS grabs his phone from his pockets and tries it.*

MARGO I can't find my phone. I swear I had it a moment ago.

MAGNUS We're screwed then. Mine has no signal.

*MAGNUS goes back to the sofa and starts smoking a cigarette. MARGO follows and sits down next to him. She holds her hand out for a cigarette too. MAGNUS reluctantly gives her one. They lean in close as he lights it for her. MARGO blows smoke in his face and gets up, walking over to the bookshelves, running her fingers along the spines. She pulls out a few and flicks through their contents.*

MAGNUS What are you doing now?

MARGO If we're going to be trapped in here, I'm certainly not spending my time talking to you.

MAGNUS *(his hand over his heart like he has been shot)* How you wound me. Come on. It could be like a dramatic scene in a play someone will write about me one day. *(He walks over to MARGO, grabbing the book she is holding.)* Certainly more interesting than... Ah, feeling sentimental are we?

*MARGO snatches the book back and puts it away.*

MARGO I'll have you know my Beatrice is still renowned to this day. Any sentimentality has nothing to do with you.

MAGNUS *Your* Beatrice would be nothing without *my* Benedict.

MARGO She would be wonderfully independent.

MAGNUS You can't have one without the other.

MARGO Are we having more than one conversation?

MAGNUS (*with a shrug*) Without me, you wouldn't be where you are.

MARGO I could say the same to you.

MAGNUS (*walking away, sitting on the sofa*) Agree to disagree.

MARGO You always end with a Jade's trick. (*She perches on the windowsill.*) I insist you drop out of Richard's play.

MAGNUS Oh! You insist, do you? No.

MARGO Then I'll make you leave.

MAGNUS No.

MARGO You're insufferable.

MAGNUS I am, aren't I. But you're being unfair... How about you leave since you hate me so much.

MARGO (*shifting slightly*) No.

MAGNUS Well then, I suppose we need to learn how to work together again.

MARGO We do not need to learn anything; I will make your life a living hell.

MAGNUS Oh, please do, my life has been so boring lately.

MARGO You're enjoying this. You signed up just to spite me, didn't you?

MAGNUS I wish. No, Richard approached me, and unlike you, I'm not afraid to admit that my career is on a bit of a low.

MARGO My career is not on a low.

MAGNUS If you say so... I blame you for the state of mine.

MARGO You blame me?

MAGNUS I blame you for a lot of things. Anyway, you can't be angry at me. You were already cast when Richard approached me. (*Teasingly.*) You might want to ask him what his plan is.

MARGO Seeing as you're gloating, you already know this plan, so do tell.

MAGNUS Maybe if you ask nicely.

MARGO (*annoyed*) Tell me.

*MAGNUS gives her a look that says no, only if you say please. MARGO rolls her eyes.*

MARGO (*reluctantly*) Please. (*MAGNUS gestures for more. MARGO gets on her knees.*) Mr Dewitt, I'd be extremely grateful if you could please tell me what Richard's plan is.

MAGNUS (*tucking a strand of MARGO's hair behind her ear*) Miss Hamilton. Darling. Dear... Never.

MARGO Why you.

*MARGO tackles MAGNUS on the sofa. She holds him by the collar. They both lie struggling, MARGO on top of MAGNUS. MAGNUS holds up his hands in surrender.*

MAGNUS (*laughing*) Woah, woah. I never promised I would actually answer your question. (*She flips him onto the floor, pulling his arms behind his back.*) Fine. Fine. I'll tell you... Can you at least let me go?

MARGO (*pulling him harder*) Nope.

MAGNUS OK, OK. Richard thinks the new play will be a massive hit, but only if the both of us are in it.

MARGO And why does he think that?

MAGNUS Because we hate each other so much. Adds a bit of panache. The public want to see what will happen if we are forced to work together. Which at this point, may not be much different to my current predicament.

MARGO The bastard! He used me. Manipulated *me*.

MAGNUS Margo!

*MARGO lets him go, and he gives a sigh of relief.*

MARGO (*starts pacing*) Wait till I get out of here. How dare he treat us like some sort of experiment. There's a reason we haven't worked together in years. I'll not stand for this. (*MAGNUS has gone quiet.*) You don't actually agree with this do you?

MAGNUS I think he's onto something.

MARGO Unbelievable.

MAGNUS It's worked before. Bette Davis and Joan Crawford in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* You've got to admit, it's genius for marketing.

MARGO No way. I'm not doing it.

MAGNUS Can you put your fragile ego away for one minute and actually consider this.

MARGO Fragile ego!

MAGNUS Why? Because you hate me, or because you can't compete with me?

MARGO Hate goes without saying. And compete? Please. We're not even in the same league.

MAGNUS No, we're not. I'm better.

MARGO In what universe? I've always been the star in this partnership.

MAGNUS Is that what you're calling it now?

MARGO We always were more of a business arrangement.

MAGNUS Then I'm at least your equal. You need two to tango.

MARGO But it only takes one to steal the show.

MAGNUS I won't have it! You belittle me every chance you get. You would be nothing without me. (*MAGNUS goes over to the bookshelves and starts grabbing the plays he references, throwing them at MARGO. She is successful and unsuccessful in dodging them, sometimes throwing them back.*) *Much Ado About Nothing, Private Lives, A Streetcar, Macbeth, Betrayal, Anthony and Cleopatra, The Deep Blue Sea.* To mention but a few.

MARGO Stop. You've proved your point.

MAGNUS These shows wouldn't work at all with only half the relationship. You delude yourself in thinking you're the backbone to every play you've performed.

*MARGO is wounded by MAGNUS's comments, and the books. Instead of crying her instinct is to fight him back. She tackles him, which MAGNUS was unprepared for. They fall to the ground and roll around the room, knocking various objects over. They hurl insults at each other the entire time.*

MARGO I hate you!

MAGNUS I detest you!

MARGO I abhor you!

MAGNUS I loathe you!

MARGO I despise you!

*They are both on the floor again. MAGNUS on top of MARGO. There's a pause as they catch their breaths. They stare into each other's eyes. They lean into each other a little, MAGNUS pulls away. He helps her off the floor and they both sit on the sofa.*

MAGNUS I must say, that was very dignified.

MARGO You were being incredibly rude.

MAGNUS I was being honest.

MARGO You think this will help our careers then?

MAGNUS Genuinely... yes. Even if the story is shit, people will pay just to see the two of us interact.

MARGO What do you think they'll pay to see?

MAGNUS A fight, to feud.

MARGO I see the appeal. We do provide some good drama.

MAGNUS For sure.

MARGO I'm Bette Davis though... If it's going to be that kind of arrangement.

MAGNUS Oh, darling, you're definitely Joan Crawford.

MARGO But I like standing on stairs, smoking, drinking, and insulting people.

*MAGNUS laughs and walks over to the record player in the corner of the library. He flicks through the records and puts one on, a slow tango.*

MAGNUS Haven't heard this one for a long time.

*MAGNUS gestures to MARGO to join him for a dance. She accepts. They dance closely, becoming one with themselves and the music. Lost.*

MARGO Why did you leave me?

MAGNUS You're going to ruin the moment.

MARGO Why?

*MAGNUS breaks the embrace and turns off the music. He stays by the record player. MARGO stays standing where he left her.*

MAGNUS Because you'd do *anything* for fame and fortune.

MARGO So would you.

MAGNUS Not like you.

MARGO You know that I'd never do anything to hurt you.

MAGNUS I don't know about that.

MARGO (*diverting the conversation*) What do you expect to happen... during this project?

MAGNUS Something.

MARGO And that is?

MAGNUS I want us to happen.

MARGO We already happened.

MAGNUS Again. I want us to happen again.

MARGO I'll remind you; you were the reason we stopped happening in the first place.

MAGNUS You gave me no choice.

MARGO No choice?

MAGNUS No! You changed. You were so innocent. We were innocent. All we had was our love and ambition.

MARGO Oh, don't say something so cringy.

MAGNUS Except you became too ambitious. Obsessed even.

MARGO We both became too ambitious.

MAGNUS You're not good for me and I resent you for it.

MARGO You're giving me very conflicting statements.

MAGNUS I just don't know. I want you and I don't want you.

MARGO Try.

MAGNUS You became ruthless.

MARGO We had to be ruthless. How else are we to stand out and be memorable in this industry these days.

MAGNUS You say we, but you were the one who destroyed that girl's life.

MARGO What girl?

MAGNUS Don't play dumb. You know exactly what I'm talking about. Does the name Cordelia Smith ring a bell?

MARGO (*flinching slightly*) Smith is such a common name—

MAGNUS —But Cordelia is not. (*MAGNUS walks over to MARGO, standing close behind her as she turns her back on him.*) I know what you did. I've known for a while. I had my suspicions at the time, but I didn't want to believe them.

MARGO Don't believe them.

MAGNUS I do.

MARGO It was just an accident.

MAGNUS (*walking away*) Sure.

MARGO You were there!

MAGNUS Exactly and something wasn't right. So, confess.

MARGO There's nothing to confess.

MAGNUS If you don't at least tell *me* the truth, I'll tell the whole world how much of a monster you can be. They won't care if it's all lies.

*MARGO goes silent. She paces for a second. She looks at MAGNUS with a small grin, to see if he is joking. MAGNUS looks back, eyebrows raised, to say I'm not bluffing.*

MARGO Give me your word you'll never tell another living soul.

MAGNUS I give you my word, gentleman's honour.

*MARGO sits next to MAGNUS and steals another of his cigarettes.*

MARGO It was an accident, but then an opportunity arose from it. Smith was only a minor character in our production at the time. Then I found out she'd auditioned for Blanche in *A Streetcar* and was successful. I was furious. She was meant to be my friend. She had stabbed *me* in the back and thought I wouldn't find out. That was *my* role. I can't possibly think why she thought she was better than me. I needed the role more than her; it was my ticket to eternal fame... One night, there was a horrible storm. Storm Lilith or something they called it. Well, the theatre was derelict, and Lilith wreaked havoc on it. There was chaos backstage. Flooding, leaks, power cuts. The poor girl was simply rushing to get back on stage before she missed her cue. She slipped... Two flights of stairs. It was tragic. She died a couple of days later... Of course I visited her and asked for her blessing to play Blanche. Convinced Richard to give me the part and I dedicated it to her memory. And well, you know the rest.

MAGNUS And that's the story you're sticking with?

MARGO It's the truth.

MAGNUS You agreed to confess.

MARGO I confess I was glad she had that accident.

MAGNUS You're self-centred and heartless.

MARGO You've only just realised that?

MAGNUS No, I realised it then. That's why I left you.

MARGO I don't blame you.

MAGNUS Is that a sense of remorse I hear?

MARGO According to you, I can't possibly possess remorse. (*MAGNUS starts to pace a little.*) Did that not go your way?

MAGNUS What?

MARGO You imagined I'd murdered her, didn't you? You wanted my confession for a reason.

MAGNUS No, I just wanted the truth.

MARGO You forget. I know you too. You said yourself earlier, that we are both ambitious. You could use a confession for blackmail.

MAGNUS You're putting words into my mouth.

MARGO No, it is you putting words into my mouth. What is it you really want from me?

MAGNUS You. I don't care who you've turned into. We've both changed, and I don't think for the better. I want you, but I need to know everything. If I take you back, I need your trust and honesty.

MARGO What makes you so sure I'll take you back?

MAGNUS I can see it in your eyes. (*MAGNUS moves in close to MARGO and speaks into her ear.*) I don't care if you lie, cheat, and steal your way

through life. I don't care if you treat everyone like they're dirt on your shoes. So long as I have you, and you are true to me alone. I am the only one who knows you. I know you're lying, and I don't care. You intoxicate me; I'm addicted. (*Their breathing gets heavier.*) I love you.

*MAGNUS cups MARGO's cheek and kisses her passionately. She returns it with equal fervour. They speak in between kisses as they cling to each other.*

MARGO You broke my heart.

MAGNUS I love you.

MARGO If you ever do that again, I'll kill you.

MAGNUS I would let you.

MARGO This is twisted.

MAGNUS I love you.

MARGO I love you too.

*They fall against the bookshelves and carry on until no breath is left in their bodies.*

MAGNUS We are more perfect together now than we ever were before.

MARGO Is that so?

MAGNUS Undoubtedly. Now, how about we figure a way out of this room?

MARGO The window?

*MAGNUS goes over to the window and tries it. It's locked.*

MAGNUS (*searching around the room*) Maybe there's a key somewhere?

MARGO I'll try the side table. (*MARGO goes to the side table that the lamp sits on and opens the small drawer, digging through its contents. She then pulls out a key.*) Voila!

MAGNUS Marvellous. *(He grabs the key from her and tries it in the window. It works. He peers outside of it.)* Right. There's only a small drop, just a couple of metres. Then we can circle round and get back to the party.

MARGO *(looking out the window)* Fine, if it's our only way out. *(MAGNUS gives her a hand onto the ledge.)* Oh, wait my shoes. I can't land in these heels. *(She takes her shoes off and hands them to MAGNUS.)* Thank you darling. *(They kiss each other again, and before MARGO jumps, she looks earnestly into MAGNUS's eyes, and quietly confesses.)* I did it. I pushed her down the stairs... I destroyed her.

MAGNUS *(grinning)* Thank you.

*He kisses MARGO again. MARGO leaps off and lands safely on the ground outside. MAGNUS drops her shoes down.*

MARGO Are you coming or what?!

*Just then, MAGNUS's phone rings.*

MAGNUS Just a minute. My phone is ringing.

MARGO I thought you didn't have signal?!

*MAGNUS ignores her question and answers the phone, he walks to the other side of the room so MARGO can't listen in.*

MAGNUS Hello. Yes. It's all sorted, she's on board. Now you'll keep your side of the bargain and blacklist her after the production? Good. Yes, I'll make sure she doesn't change her mind, you can be sure of that. Thanks. See you later. *(MAGNUS hangs up and scrolls through his phone. He plays a recording of MARGO's partial confession from earlier and her true confession from seconds ago. He smiles and places the phone back into his pocket.)* The gentlemen in me disappeared a long time ago. *(MAGNUS then takes out the broken door handle and reattaches it to the door easily. He grabs a lockpick from his pocket too and pushes it into the keyhole.*

*There is a slight thud on the other side of the door. Magnus opens it, reaching to the ground to pick up the key lying in the hallway. He laughs, and pockets them again.) Thank you, Richard.*

MARGO Magnus!

MAGNUS Margo!

MARGO It's freezing out here!

MAGNUS Alright, alright. I'm coming.

*MAGNUS turns off the lamp as he goes past. Then climbs out the window to join*

*MARGO. Lights down.*

CUT TO BLACK

RHIA HAYER

*And Then There Was One*

CHARACTERS

JO *A young girl moving to study abroad (20)*

THEA *Jo's 'friend', a young girl staying (19)*

JOHN *Jo's father (47)*

*This is a one-act play. The action takes place one evening in London, England, in Summer, this year.*

LIGHTS UP

*London, England, 9pm*

*A large, bright room lit by many chandeliers. White sheets covering all that is in the room. There are five side by side, floor to ceiling windows filled with the dimly lit view of the outdoors. The room is so quiet apart from the echoing sound of the music and chatter from the party commencing in the next room over.*

*To the side of the room is a pile of boxes that seems to grow throughout the night as the going away gifts start to pile in.*

*JO enters an empty room to place the gifts that fill her arms. THEA follows.*

JO Oh, hey T.

THEA Hey

JO Just had to get away for a second, you know. This is all so exciting but overwhelming.

*She sighs followed by a giggle. With no answer JO looks up to see THEA shooting a small smile, closing the door behind her. JO's eyebrows tighten at this unusual sight but quickly return to normal.*

JO You alright T?

THEA Yeah, just trying to take this all in you know.

JO (*smiling to herself*) I know. I know it sucks man, but you'll be fine. I mean we can facetime every night, it'll be like I'm not even gone. I mean isn't this just wonderful. I've been dreaming about this day for as long as I can remember and it's finally come.

THEA (*scoffs*) Wonderful.

JO Yeah, I mean—

*JO pauses re-organising the boxes and turns to face THEA.*

JO T you okay?

THEA (*sarcastically*) Yeah, I'm fine.

*Followed by a sniff to hold back tears.*

JO Thea if you have something to say please just say it. This is supposed to be a fun night and I don't want anything to mess it up, okay.

*THEA raises her eyebrows while her gaze stays on the ground.*

THEA Wow. I'm already just 'anything'.

*THEA whispers to herself but loud enough for JO to hear.*

JO Not right now—

*JO is cut off by Thea raising her voice.*

THEA (*cries*) Then when?

*Her words echo the room until she speaks again.*

THEA If not now then when? huh? It's not like this is the last time we are going to see each other — oh wait.

JO Why are you doing this? You're supposed to be happy for me.

THEA Don't — don't do that. I have only ever been happy for you. When is it my turn? (*Whispering the last part, voice broken with emotion.*)

JO I'm not leaving you.

*JO gets closer to THEA.*

THEA I was alone before you. I had no one. Not even myself.

JO I know. I know, but I promise you nothing is going to change.

THEA I know. We can facetime, it'll be like you're not even gone. Until those days turn into weeks and weeks into every holiday and the next thing you know I'm a Stranger. Somebody you shoot awkward smiles at and have to force conversations with to not be rude. Just someone you shared a bed with all summer—

JO Shh.

*JO's head turns to the door.*

*THEA looks at JO in disbelief, tears down her face, voice shaking, whispering to avoid the lump in her throat.*

THEA Not only are you leaving me, but you're asking me to pretend. To lie?

*There's a knock on the door followed by its opening and a man entering: JO's father.*

JOHN I just came to say, we're about to cut th—

*He stops as he sees both the girls with glassy eyes.*

JOHN (*worried*) Is everything alright girls?

JO Mmh.

JOHN Ah everything's going to be okay. You two are such good friends, it'll work out.

*THEA chuckles after the word 'friends' is muttered, locking eyes with the floor in front of the doorway where JO's father stood.*

JOHN Anyway I'll leave you girls at it, cake in ten!

*JOHN turns around and leaves. The sound of the door closing echoes throughout the room.*

THEA You're asking me to act like we are – were – nothing. While you go off and forget me, while I have to stay here with everything little thing screaming at me to remember. Having to face your family and listen to them tell me how much of good 'friends' we are. You think that it doesn't kill me that you're leaving, not just with everything I have but more. With a piece of me? And you want me to sit here with a smile on my face?

*THEA whispers the last part, now wary of being heard.*

THEA You're asking me to act like it's all okay. Like the only reason I'm upset is because I'm losing a friend and not because my fucking heart is being ripped from my chest.

*Both girls stare at each other, not saying a word for a moment.*

JO I – I don't know what you want me to do.

*THEA scoffs and looks away from JO.*

THEA You've got to be kidding me.

JO Tell me. What do you want me to do? I'll do it.

THEA I want you to fucking care, that's what I want.

*JO steps back startled by the volume of THEA's voice.*

THEA Was any of it real?

JO What?

THEA You heard me. Was any of it real?

JO Of course it was.

THEA Don't lie to me.

JO I'm not.

THEA If it was you wouldn't be able to do this, leave, leave me so easily so either none of this was real or there's someone else. Is there? Someone else?

JO Thea, would you stop being so goddamn delusional for a second.

*The room once again rid of their voices. JO moves closer to THEA, pausing after every step, checking for permission before pulling THEA in for a hug which was neither accepted nor denied.*

JO I know what you're doing. You're trying to hate me rather than miss me, because deep down I think we both know why we can't—

*THEA immediately pushes JO off her, taking a step back.*

THEA Bullshit.

JO We can't. I can't.

THEA Well what if we—

JO They will never accept me Thea, they will never accept us. That's why I have to go and clear my mind. Maybe I'll come back—

THEA Straight?

JO You're a real dick Thea.

THEA No but that's what you want isn't it? You want to move away for a while forget any of this ever happened, come back with a degree and a boyfriend so your family celebrates you and you

can live happily ever after in a fucking lie. That's the real reason you're going isn't it. You'd deny my existence before you were seen with me in public.

JO You know we can't be seen.

THEA We've done nothing wrong.

*THEA's voice breaks as she finally drops the tough act. JO's expression changes as she wipes her tears away and turns to organise the presents again.*

THEA W— (*she whispers to herself*) Did I just hit some rewind button or something? Jo? Jo.

*JO finally turns back around but her gaze lingers on the presents for a moment before meeting THEA's.*

JO T? There's no present with your name on it over here.

*THEA reaches into her pocket pulling out a necklace with a sunflower engraved into it.*

THEA Well, I did bring this. Something to remember me by. But I guess you won't be needing that anymore.

JO You're killing me.

THEA Good. So, you know how it feels.

JO That's not fair. None of this is.

*Both girls pause, guilt of the words that have been shared. Thea turns her back to JO, not wanting to be seen.*

THEA I'm sorry Jo—

*JO smiles weakly at THEA as THEA turns to meet eyes with JO.*

JO We can still call every night.

THEA J—

JO It'll be like I'm not even gone.

THEA Jo.

JO Please.

THEA I can't do this Jo.

JO I won't lose you.

THEA We can't be friends.

JO (*cries*) I can't lose you.

THEA You should've thought about that before I fell in love with you.

*The room silent, the only sound to be heard is the echoing music and chatter from the room next door which seems to sound a bit louder than before.*

JO W—

*JO goes to answer but stops as she looks up to see THEA looking into the doorway with her eyes open wide with both shock and fear.*

LIGHTS DOWN OR BLACKOUT

STEPHANIE IVANOVA

*The Weight of Sins*

OSCAR *Male, late 40s*

ANDY *Male, late 30s*

ACT I

LIGHTS UP

*There's a wooden barrel centre stage, supported by metal brackets. A rope with a loop is hanging over the barrel. ANDY enters from stage right, and OSCAR follows, limping with his right foot, no shoe on it. OSCAR sits on the barrel.*

ANDY No. You can't sit there.

OSCAR Why not? My leg hurts.

ANDY Sit somewhere else. This is his barrel.

OSCAR Who's barrel?

ANDY You know – his.

OSCAR His? Do you mean... him?

ANDY Of course I mean him, who else could I mean?

OSCAR Well... if it is his barrel... he won't be needing it anymore.

ANDY It's his barrel. Get up.

*ANDY pushes OSCAR off the barrel. OSCAR sits on the floor, at one end of the stage.*

OSCAR What did you do that for? He is dead, he won't come back for a stupid barrel... (*Laughs.*) It's a barrel.

ANDY It doesn't matter. It's his barrel, and you know...

OSCAR I don't know.

ANDY (*whispering*) It's where he died.

OSCAR Who?

ANDY HE.

OSCAR He's deaf? Good for him, can't hear your annoying voice anymore.

ANDY Dead, not deaf... you are deaf.

*Silence.*

OSCAR My foot hurts...

ANDY It's your fault. You didn't watch where you were going.

OSCAR It's your fault, you pushed me.

ANDY I didn't push you.

*ANDY sits on the other end of the stage. The empty barrel is between them. They look at it for a second.*

OSCAR You knew him?

ANDY Who? I knew him... as much as one can. Strange fellow.

OSCAR Would I have liked him?

ANDY No one liked him.

OSCAR You did.

ANDY Not anymore I don't. (*In a hurry.*) Now stop talking of him. I don't want to talk of him.

*ANDY turns his back to OSCAR.*

OSCAR Why not?

ANDY It doesn't matter. Stop talking.

*Silence.*

ANDY Stop talking.

OSCAR I haven't said anything.

ANDY You keep talking, of things you don't understand... of him.

OSCAR You're the one talking... you always talk, as if the world would like to listen to you. You and your stupid talking... this and that... and him. You always speak of him. Tomorrow you like him, today you don't... I'm so tired of him.

*They both stand up, turning to each other.*

ANDY He's dead... you are not supposed to speak ill of the dead.

OSCAR Or what? He will come back to tell me off.

ANDY You're lucky he can't.

OSCAR Why? What would he do?

ANDY (*fearfully*) You have no idea... what he was capable of.

OSCAR Why do you think he killed himself?

*ANDY walks to the barrel.*

ANDY Because he was a drunk... and a snitch.

OSCAR Did you think that rope was all it took? It's a thin rope.

ANDY (*mimicking*) It's a thin rope... it's a rope.

OSCAR He was a fat man. That's a thin rope.

*ANDY steps on the barrel. ANDY looks down at OSCAR.*

ANDY I'm a big man.

OSCAR Yes, but he was a fat man. His neck was double the size of yours.

ANDY No, it was not. I have the biggest neck in town. Everyone knows that. Do you think me a liar?

OSCAR Yeah, his neck was bigger. And that rope is too thin for both of you.

*ANDY takes the rope with anger and puts it around his neck.*

ANDY See...

*OSCAR pulls a clamp on the wall, and the rope suddenly tightens around ANDY's neck, lifting all but the ends of his feet off the barrel.*

ANDY Now, now. Don't mess around. The rope feels tight this isn't a joke.

OSCAR It's a thin rope it will break.

ANDY Let's not test it, huh?

OSCAR Just wondering?

ANDY About what?

OSCAR How does it feel? Being so close to death.

ANDY It's... ironic?

OSCAR Ironic? What in death could be ironic?

ANDY It could be. I'll die just like him. Without having sinned. The ones he burns in hell for. Being a little snitch.

OSCAR You know, some people say shared sin is a half sin.

ANDY What else do people say?

OSCAR That he was your dog... always going after you. Scared but loyal.

ANDY Scared? You didn't know him. He would have given you a reason to be scared.

*ANDY pulls forward trying to force the rope loose but it's no use.*

OSCAR Was he so scary?

ANDY He was the devil himself... every single inch of that fat, fat body.

OSCAR And what did the devil promise you, that night?

ANDY What night?

OSCAR Come on, we both know it.

*OSCAR walks to the chair, he kicks away one of the brackets holding the barrel up.*

ANDY What you doing man?

OSCAR Justice.

ANDY For who?

OSCAR For the boy.

ANDY I... I know nothing of a boy, man. Let me go. I don't know what you are talking about. You're mad. I'll scream. They will hear me. I'm telling you. You won't get away with this.

OSCAR They found him here, hanging like a little fish on a hook, days after his neck broke. He was lucky you know. His neck snapped right away. Do you think yours will break too, or you will suffocate?

*ANDY tries to remove the rope from his neck, but OSCAR's legs kick another bracket. The wooden barrel makes a noise under the weight of the man. ANDY stops moving.*

ANDY The cops will know. They will find you.

OSCAR They didn't find you, or about your crime. You went home fine, every night after it. Why would they? You covered everything

so well... exempt him. No, you thought he was going to be loyal again. But this time it was different. This time you did something else. You crossed a line, and even he felt it.

ANDY Please, I'll confess. What he did. It was all him, I'm telling you.

OSCAR And then what. You'll get a few years max. Why would I allow this?

ANDY You... will kill me. I did nothing. It was all him. ALL HIM.

OSCAR He told me everything. At the bar, it was just me and him. And he sang, oh, so pretty he sang. About the big job he had found. And then... about the poor woman you raped. And the boy... that little boy.

ANDY I didn't rape her. He did.

OSCAR Doesn't matter about the woman. It's the boy. I care about what you did to the boy.

ANDY *whines.*

ANDY I didn't mean to, man. It was an accident. It was just a job. They shouldn't have been there. You know me, man. I wouldn't hurt a fly. The kid just broke... I didn't mean to hurt it... It was thin and it just... broke.

OSCAR Just broke? Kids don't break like toys. You stepped on his chest, breaking his ribs until they pierced his lungs, and his heart gave out. He said you enjoyed it.

ANDY What? He is lying. Who are you going to believe? Me or him. He was a... a... he raped her, man. He was the one to kill the kid... I promise I tried to stop him; I did. But he was bigger than me, he pushed me off. You've seen his neck man, thicker than mine.

*ANDY tries to reach OSCAR. OSCAR leans his body, escaping his reach.*

ANDY Come here. Face me like a man. (*Angry.*) Do you think you're better than me? I've seen you. The real you. This vigilante persona does not suit you. I know the stories about you. Thinking you're better than all of us for making the world a safer place, without me. Without him?

OSCAR Oh, I'm just like you... just like him... just like the boy you killed. A little scared, a little sad... but a lot angrier. I know where I'm headed. We will meet again I'm sure. Down below. I believe this. Tell me what do you believe?

ANDY Belief?! You're insane. That's what I believe.

OSCAR Sanity, like many other things in this world, is a point of view.

*OSCAR moves his leg, kicking another bracket. A scream escapes ANDY's throat, and the lines of the wooden barrel part a little.*

ANDY (*whining*) Come on man, I don't want to die. Please, I swear I will tell you everything. All of it. What he did... what I did. Please, man.

OSCAR Do you know what happens to a man like you in prison?

ANDY You were my friend.

OSCAR I was never a friend to you. He was your friend. And see where he got you. On the end of a rope. Is this what friends do? He said it... it was all you. Didn't even blink an eye before throwing you under the bus. See what kind of friends you keep.

ANDY He told you that because you had him on a rope. You killed him too, here... with the same rope.

OSCAR Killed him? (*Laughs.*) I didn't kill him. He killed himself. But before that, he came to me and told me. He trusted me to hear him, to silently listen to his sins. No, let it all out. Even the sins before he met you.

ANDY Why would he?

OSCAR It's simple. He was tired. He didn't want to do it anymore.

ANDY Stealing?

OSCAR Living.

ANDY So, you killed him?

OSCAR *shakes his head.*

OSCAR I told you, he hung himself.

ANDY And why would I believe anything you say?

OSCAR Why would I lie?

ANDY Because you're lonely. You said it yourself. You are just like me, just like him. You want to speak, to be heard. Otherwise, you would have killed me by now. You want me to listen to your story.

OSCAR Do you think you can buy yourself time?

ANDY Someone will come.

OSCAR You believe that? Who's coming? Who would come for you? Even he wouldn't. Your loyal dog. You were happy with him gone, weren't you? All that money you stole, you thought you'd find it. But he didn't tell you did he? Where he hid it?

ANDY (*hopeful*) You know?

ANDY *tries to turn around. The rope tightens around ANDY's neck.*

ANDY We can share it.

OSCAR Why would I? I could have it all for myself if I wish it. But there are so many others that need it. It's for them. I've already given it away.

ANDY I can give my share. I still have some left. You can have all of it. Give it away too.

OSCAR Do you think I care for the money?

ANDY What do you care for then? The woman? Was she your woman?

OSCAR No. I never knew her.

ANDY The child then? Is this what you care for? The boy?

OSCAR Yes, the boy.

ANDY You knew the boy?

OSCAR No. Well, not in a sense of what you talk of. But I knew them, all of them. They speak to me; you'll never understand it. It's in the touch of the wind, in the shine of the stars, in the warmth of the sun. I see them every day. Have you ever looked into the eyes of a child? A happy innocent child. There is so much hope inside their eyes. They are big and full of wonder. Who are you to take that away, with pleasure nonetheless? Do you even know the boy's name? I guess now it all feels like a bad dream. Considering where you are more of a nightmare. Do you want to hear it?

ANDY Shut up.

OSCAR (*laughs*) Or what? What will you do?

ANDY You won't get away with this. . . I won't die here.

OSCAR Are you truly that stupid?

ANDY I'll. . . I'll. . .

OSCAR Don't you understand... you died the minute you met me at the bar today.

ANDY (*angry*) You're a coward, Oscar. You've never killed anyone. You're not the type.

OSCAR And what type would that be? You? Or Him?

ANDY Him... him... him...

OSCAR Are you angry with him? Do not mourn, you will reunite soon.

*OSCAR's leg kicks out another bracket.*

ANDY Stop that!

OSCAR It won't be me that pulls you down. It'll be the weight of your sins.

ANDY I...

*OSCAR's leg kicks the last bracket.*

*Lights go out.*

OSCAR The little boy's name was Aaron.

*We hear the fall of the wood and the metal rings. The sounds of ANDY choking.*

SIVAN MOHAMED

*Timeless Cabinet*

FADE IN

INT. OFFICE, CHEVENING HOUSE — DAY

*Rays of sun blind us through a period window frame. They highlight a small, circular table beside. Specks of dust dance around in the air.*

*BUZZ. A mechanical hum drones from the table. On it we notice a landline, with its receiver carelessly dropped beside it.*

FADE OUT.

EXT. GARDEN — MORNING

*A young boy bounces down the garden tracks, his hands cupped together.*

*This is ARTHUR, fresh faced and ready to play.*

*He muddies his knees dropping down, revealing dozens of cloudy marbles as they crash to the ground.*

*CLUNK. They collide against each flying apart as another rolls in.*

*ARTHUR takes aim with one eye, pinpointing his line of attack when —*

*He FLICKS. The marble barrels forward but skids past its target. ARTHUR frowns.*

*WILLIAM (O.S.) Have you missed every shot like that?*

*ARTHUR rolls his eyes as the man kneels to his eye level. This is WILLIAM HUGHES, ARTHUR's father.*

*YOUNG ARTHUR (offended) No, look!*

*He points towards the scattered marbles, WILLIAM impressed at his display.*

WILLIAM Looks like a victory to me. Want to celebrate with breakfast?

YOUNG ARTHUR Can I eat later? Please?

WILLIAM You know we eat as a family. If wolves can do it so can we.

YOUNG ARTHUR But what if a wolf isn't hungry.

WILLIAM Then it sits and howls. You can come howl.

*ARTHUR reluctantly lifts himself up.*

YOUNG ARTHUR I bet they still get to play.

*WILLIAM rests a hand on his son.*

WILLIAM No one's stopping you from doing that, we're just spending a few moments together.

YOUNG ARTHUR Do wolves spend all their time together?

WILLIAM As a pack yes. They're inseparable. You know what, Grandpa always had a saying. Make time for family or time will take them away.

*WILLIAM motions towards the house.*

WILLIAM Now come on.

*ARTHUR stares at his father. Thinking, before catching up. WILLIAM holds him by shoulder as they walk towards the house.*

INT. BEDROOM, CHEVENING HOUSE — MORNING

*A handful of marbles sit neatly on the windowsill. Other beloved things from heirlooms to pictures litter the room.*

*And then we see a man in nightclothes, slouched on the edge of his bed.*

*This is ARTHUR now. He's seventy-two, with grey straight hair and a slim frame. A sharpness in his face.*

*He stares down. Reflecting on something, a weight on his shoulders. A sadness to his eyes.*

*He is the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.*

INT. BATHROOM — MOMENTS LATER

*The faucet twists and steaming water runs out. ARTHUR dips his brush into shaving foam and begins his morning routine.*

*He lays his head just above the water, staring into the ceiling tiles.*

JOURNALIST (O.S.) *The people of this country have one question. Where is the Prime Minister? We can't afford to keep the lights on, and Hughes has gone on holiday!*

*ARTHUR flicks the radio off, sinking into the bathwater.*

INT. BEDROOM, CHEVENING HOUSE — MOMENTS LATER

*He gently slides on his clothes. Grabbing some cufflinks from the table he struggles them through his shirt.*

*Peering back down to the landline, receiver in place he begins to question. . .*

*But turns away.*

INT. MAIN ROOM, CHEVENING HOUSE — MORNING

*'AN OLD MAN IN A NEW WORLD,' reads a headline. 'DOES EVERY HUGHES GO MAD?!', another.*

*An older lady gazes down disappointedly at the harsh words.*

*This is ELISE HUGHES. Forty years in public life, fifty years by ARTHUR's side. He could have never made it without her.*

*Opposite her a little boy is messing with a toy. This is GEORGE, their grandson.*

GEORGE (*distracted*) I'm hungry.

ELISE I know. We just have to wait for Grandpa—

*The doors creak open. She's interrupted by ARTHUR entering the room. Silence.*

ELISE George why don't you go tell Mr Patton you're hungry. See what's for breakfast?

*GEORGE drops his toy, jumping past ARTHUR to the hallway.*

*ELISE looks up to her husband, trying to catch his eyes.*

ELISE (*motions to the papers*) Opinions?

*ARTHUR stares at the headlines. He's read these ones already.*

ELISE You don't think it's time?

ARTHUR This happens to every PM. It's just the papers looking for sales.

ELISE (*disheartened*) You know this is different. They smell blood.

ARTHUR (*to her eyes now*) Whose? I know when they're just trying to ruin me.

ELISE Even the party smells it. They're surrounding you.

ARTHUR (*agitated*) That's politics. They're hungry and think I'm their next meal.

ELISE Arthur.

ARTHUR What? What do you want me to do Elise?

*She gives him a knowing glare.*

ARTHUR (*realising*) Oh you know I can't. I *won't*. I *need* to get this country through this.

ELISE All it takes is one phone call and you don't *have* to. Richard is gone, without a chancellor you have no backing.

ARTHUR I'll get another one. And if they resign I'll get another.

ELISE And if everyone resigns? Everyone but you.

ARTHUR (*chokes out a laugh*) Oh you too?

ELISE Shut up Arthur. You know I don't think that.

ARTHUR Why not? Outdated. Old-fashioned. An antique. They talk about me like I'm already dead.

*Their silence fills the room.*

ELISE (*hesitant*) How many years do you have left?

ARTHUR Two until the next el—

ELISE Not the bloody election. You're seventy-two. Never drank never smoked but you have what, twenty, maybe twenty-five years left?

*ARTHUR stares uncomfortably.*

ELISE Your grandson needs a grandfather. I need a husband.

ARTHUR That's why we're here. On holiday?

ELISE Tell yourself that. You're not here for a holiday. You're here to hide.

*ELISE rises from the table, leaving a shamed ARTHUR. She stops at the door.*

ELISE You've given them fifty years. Spare us ten.

*She shuts the door behind her, leaving ARTHUR alone.*

INT/EXT. ASTON MARTIN — DAY

*The engine ROARS as ARTHUR grips the wheel. His face solemn.*

*In the passenger seat is GEORGE, smiling in exhilaration.*

*The Aston glides down the country roads, wind ripping against the body.*

EXT. LAY-BY — DAY

*The dirt crunches as they roll to a stop by a country path. GEORGE hops out running in front whilst ARTHUR takes his time.*

EXT. COUNTRY-PATH — DAY

*They stroll through nature. It's quiet, peaceful. GEORGE stumbles away in his own world.*

GEORGE Look Grandpa!

*He points towards a great collapsed tree, its roots unearthed. A chasm in the ground.*

ARTHUR My, the wind must've done that.

GEORGE Or maybe it was really old?

*ARTHUR looks down to the tree. Maybe it was too old? GEORGE looks curiously.*

*ARTHUR shoots him a half-hearted smile.*

EXT. VIEWPOINT — DAY

*The two sit on a bench, sandwiches in hand, overlooking the rolling hills and valleys.*

ARTHUR Beautiful. Don't you think?

GEORGE nods with a mouthful of food.

*ARTHUR looks down fondly to his grandson, before returning to the view. Occupied. Distracted.*

EXT. CHEVENING HOUSE — DAY

*The Aston parks up. ARTHUR eyes the house nervously. He clicks open the door and lifts himself out slowly.*

*ELISE appears from the house, walking towards them.*

ELISE (to GEORGE) And what did you two get up to?

GEORGE Grandpa drove fast!

*ARTHUR slinks past them, not a word. ELISE stares in bewilderment at GEORGE's words.*

INT. OFFICE, CHEVENING HOUSE — DAY

*ARTHUR stands by the window, leaning against the wall. He sighs, gazing down towards the landline on the table. . .*

INT. LIBRARY, CHEVENING HOUSE — DAY

*ARTHUR sits by a large window, towering bookshelves either side. The door squeaks open, ELISE peers through. ARTHUR turns to her, a faint welcoming smile. We see him slowly stirring a cup of tea, ELISE now opposite.*

ARTHUR There's an air of failure in this house.

ELISE You know that's not fair.

ARTHUR You don't think it is, but *they* do. I've given them my life and this is how I'll be remembered.

ELISE History is forgiving.

*ARTHUR looks out towards the land.*

ARTHUR I looked at George today and remembered something my dad told me years ago. 'Make time for family or time will take them away.'

*ELISE sees her husband pondering, worrying.*

ARTHUR (to his better) I just want to know I'm making the right choice.

*ELISE reaches out to her husband, resting her hand on his.*

ELISE You've done pretty well so far.

*They hold this moment, together.*

INT. OFFICE, CHEVENING HOUSE — DAY

*We return to the window, seeing movement far outside. Focusing, we make out ARTHUR and his wife hand in hand, GEORGE strolling with them. We pan left, the receiver of the landline down beside it. That familiar buzz droning on.*

*A portrait of ARTHUR hangs on the wall, beside his contemporaries. Below it reads. 'Arthur Hughes. Prime Minister of the United Kingdom'.*

EXT. GARDEN — DAY

*Wide.*

*The family hold each other close, smiling and happy. ARTHUR is finally happy.*

*CUT to black.*

## V. NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

RAJIYAH AHMED is in her second year at Greenwich University, undertaking an English Literature with Creative Writing undergraduate course. She is British Asian and has chosen to devote a lot of her writing to recognising underrepresented minorities. Rajiyah has published work with the Royal Society of Literature and has worked alongside the Forwards Arts Poetry Foundation. Her particular style of writing ranges from magic realism, poetic prose, and historical fiction. She wishes to develop her experience in creative writing and aspires to release a collection of her own. Other than her interest in creative writing, Rajiyah will spend her time reading or watching Marvel movies.

M. J. ALDRIDGE (she/they) is a 21-year-old Creative Writing and English Literature student. She has loved writing for ten years and has been into mythology even longer. Stepping out of her comfort zone, she entered her work to Greenwich Anthology hoping to get published. Aldridge hopes to continue her dreams of becoming an author by completing her degree at the University of Greenwich. Aldridge previously studied photography at her hometown college, and now takes photos to inspire her mind. After uni, she would love

to travel to learn more about different myths in different cultures. Maybe even write them.

SINEA JL ALVIS began writing as a way to express her emotions, this was suggested by her teacher Mrs Reid, who she had great respect for. Sinea enjoys writing about topics that affect her or those around her, whether that be personal or societal issues. Race and poverty are among her favourite subjects to speak on. Being of mixed heritage and coming from a working-class family, Sinea explores both its advantages and disadvantages, which also allows her to articulate her concerns and experiences of her reality.

MAXWELL-STEVEN BAKER is a twenty-two-year-old, third-year Creative Writing student. As an avid Oscar Wilde and Lord Byron fan, his work models those that came before in the Gothic and Romantic periods. Like his favourite literature, his work often features queer elements or undertones carefully manipulated into the writing. Previously, he worked on *Queer W/Rites*, an anthology of LGBT+ writers, cultivating not only his writing skills, but also branching out into publishing. This is his first time being published in the *Greenwich Anthology*.

MARIA H. BENSELER-REID is a third year English Language and Literature student who grew up in London. She takes inspiration from real life events and transfers them into her work. She enjoys the idea of portraying realistic human emotions and the drama of life in her work. The concept of WWI is an intriguing concept to her and portraying the unpleasant life of a WWI soldier was an incentive to write.



WILLIAM BEVAN-THOMAS is a Creative Writing MA student at the University of Greenwich. Although a (sane) Florida Man at heart, London has provided a perfect opportunity for him to develop his creativity. His poems typically explore themes of nature and philosophy, but William equally enjoys utilizing poetry to tell quick, entertaining stories. His primary goal in writing is to leave you wanting more.

ABIAH BLAIR-FORD is a 23-year-old first year Creative Writing and English Literature student. She has been a voracious reader since the age of three, and began writing her own stories aged five. She especially enjoys writing poetry and short stories. She is inspired by writers including Hiromi Kawakami, Emily Dickinson, and Taylor Swift. This is her first time being published.



SUSANNA GASPARINI BOUDJEMAA has a BA in Creative Writing and is currently studying for her Masters. She was born in Italy and moved to the UK as a teenager. After a life spent raising her three children, she decided to enrol at university as a mature student and pursue her dream of becoming a writer. She enjoys writing short stories with a twist of mystery, as well as crime fiction novels and screenplays. She has also written opinion pieces and reviews for a local magazine. Susanna likes travelling and, of course, being of Italian origin, she loves her food.



FARRAN BOYD is from and grew up just outside London where she loved to read and write as a child. She used to spend her childhood in libraries and the reading sections of shops. She is currently in her first year studying Creative Writing and English Literature at University of Greenwich. When submitting her poetry to the

Greenwich Anthology at the age of only 18, she was astonished that she actually got picked. When she isn't studying Shakespeare, she is often reading from the classics like Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf. More like any romance book that catches her eye.

LAURA BROWN is a second-year student who is currently studying BA Drama and English Literature at the University of Greenwich. Laura is originally from Northumberland in the Northeast of England and this is where her poetry is based and the place where it has been inspired. She comes from a large family and moved to London to pursue a career in Law. When she is not at university, Laura also trains in Ballet and Musical Theatre Jazz and in her spare time enjoys reading all genres of books, particularly Shakespeare and Louisa May Alcott, travelling and spending time with friends and family.

SAMANTHA BURTON is a third year Creative Writing and English Literature student. This is her second time being published in the Greenwich Anthology. She never used to like books when she was younger. She thought they were boring and that she should just wait for the movie to come out. However, once her dad put a book in her hands, she has never looked back. Now she is passionate about reading and writing. She also has a disturbing number of books. She blames her dad for starting her addiction.

In coming to the University of Greenwich, CALUM CORRIGAN's aim was to reignite his creative side whenever an opportunity arose. In doing so, he's begun reintegrating art into his daily routine such as drawing, but this anthology was a chance for Calum to have a go at something he'd never tried before. Due to the closeness of the

deadline, he felt that a short poem rather than an expansive creative writing piece seemed more attainable. Calum found the mental gymnastics enjoyable; trying to find something that has meaning beyond the literal – maybe even induce a thought or feeling.

SINEAD ‘SILVIE’ COX is currently a creative writing student who likes to say she knows what she’s doing. From a young age she has consumed every fantasy, supernatural, and sci-fi novel within a five hundred metre radius, and continues this trend into adulthood. Her main interests lie in the portrayal of women’s emotions in literature, particularly rage and depression. She aspires to expand the pool of sapphic literature in the mainstream as a means of creating her own representation where none existed before. If she is not writing, she can be found spending every pound in the bank in Waterstones.

JUNIA DENKER is a 21-year-old first year BA English Literature with Creative Writing student at the University of Greenwich. She grew up in Wuppertal, Germany and moved to London in 2022. Junia mainly writes introspective poetry inspired by writers such as Emily Dickinson, Gracie Abrams and Taylor Swift. This is her first time being published.

Over the past six months, LILY DENT has experimented with writing prose and scripts. Usually a poet, Lily has expanded her creative boundaries and produced her first piece of stage writing. The author’s hope is that this publication will be the first of many, and she hopes that everyone finds meaning and enjoyment from reading her writing.

When FRANCESCA DOWDESWELL was about nine, she was asked to write a biography about herself at age 80. She wrote that she was going to win Wimbledon, two Oscars then become Prime Minister. Now, a third year Creative Writing student, she writes about dark themes like her experiences with family illness with hints of comedic charm. She guesses Wimbledon is out, maybe she'll get an Oscar for screenwriting but she thinks everyone should watch out for when she becomes PM. She is excited that her first short story is being published in this anthology.

LAURA EVANS comes from the town of Didcot, Oxfordshire. She is currently in her final year of studying English Literature at Greenwich and writing her final dissertation on the 'Queen of Crime': Agatha Christie. This is her third piece of published work. When not reading her substantial book collection, which she has no room for, but continues to add to, or haunting the decks of the Cutty Sark, she can be found at the theatre or cinema. In the future, she would love to write for the film and theatre industries, and hopefully see her work come to life.

HAFSAH HAREEM FAROOQI is a girl who learnt to pick herself up. An autistic girl, she dreamed of becoming a teacher ever since childhood. However, it was not easy to make her dream become reality. Currently 19 years old, she went to university but left the course because it was different from what she expected. Questioning her future and whether she could still become a teacher, she did not give up and reignited her dream, going to a different university to get a fresh start.

AMALIE L. FLOA is a third-year Creative Writing and English Literature student from Norway. As a lover of fantasy and all things magical, she finds inspiration in fairy tales and folklore, particularly Scandinavian, and nature often plays a part in her writings. She has loved writing stories for as long as she has been able to write, first in Norwegian and then in English. In primary school, she used to write stories for her school's newspaper. Amalie also loves dogs, so when she is not busy writing or reading, you can find her dog-watching in Greenwich Park.

SHANE GIBSON is an MA Creative Writing student. Since secondary school he has used poetry to freely express his creative imagination without having to worry about his stammer. Recently Shane has been using poetry to focus on identity and finding empowerment from the burdens of the human body. He hopes that the work he creates not only helps give calm to his outlook on stammering, but to inspire others in finding peace with themselves and the little things that make them who they are.

SAM GILBERT is on the MA Creative Writing programme and has been attending this university on and off for far too long. Born in Lincoln, he now lives in Forest Hill with his black cat, Marcelline. This is his second appearance in the annual Greenwich Anthology and he is currently working on his debut novel. You might find him at the occasional open-mic, refereeing a professional wrestling match or selling cheese in Borough Market on Tuesdays.

A young woman creating fictional worlds in hopes to make an impact on the real one. Growing up every book RHIA HAYER read either didn't touch upon negative feelings and experiences or

completely glorified them, over time creating a society which did the same. Representing raw and ugly emotions wrapped in beautifully real stories is something that she is very passionate about, covering topics which little her wished was more normalised.

SIDNI HENDREN is a second-year international student majoring in English Literature with Creative Writing. Having grown up on the North Shore of Lake Superior, her work is heavily inspired by her personal experiences and deep love for nature. Her favourite books are *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer and *The Overstory* by Richard Powers. When she is not working on her degree, Sidni can be found writing letters to friends across the pond, painting, befriending bugs, or getting lost in London museums.

Born in Kishoreganj (Bangladesh) and brought up in Treviso (Italy), AIMAN ISLAM's passion for writing began at the age of 10, where she wrote her first poem about snow. Influenced by writers like Rumi and Dante, Islam pushes the boundaries between realism and surrealism with her own anthology – *Depression and Obsession* – published at the age of 18. Islam has read texts ranging from the novelist Haruki Murakami to philosophical writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche. A book she resonates with is *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. Currently in her final year at the University of Greenwich, Islam is studying Advertising and Digital Marketing where she continues to pursue her passion.

STEPHANIE IVANOVA came to the UK in 2019 with nothing but a backpack on her back and the hope of finding a better life for her artistic soul. She started her path of achieving her dream by



studying Creative Writing. The leading topics she likes to explore in her works are mental health and family relationships. She also has an interest in painting and photography.

TOBY MILLIS is a 21-year-old Creative Writing and English Lit student who fell down a rabbit hole of spoken-word poetry during the pandemic. This resulted in him entering the wonderland of studying what he was passionate about. Originally, he was at the University of Hertfordshire on a different course, but after attending a poetry, prose and script-writing society, he decided to change his scenery. Since Greenwich was local to his home in south-east London, he felt this was the right place to be for three years, so here we are!



SIVAN MOHAMED believes in the strength of a good story and its ability to connect us deeply with the lives of fictional characters we'll never meet. It doesn't matter if amazing writers make them up or great filmmakers bring them to life, these characters, their lives and experiences entertain and intrigue us. Sivan from a young age has loved film, and as he's grown just wanted to make more and more of his own. From little Lego stop-motions to now, he just hopes to keep on telling good stories.



ZAYNAH MUTTUR is a postgraduate student at the University of Greenwich. She attended the University of Greenwich in 2017 and completed a three-year degree in Business with HRM before then proceeding to study the PGCE in further education. While at the University of Greenwich, Zaynah was a key member in GSU life she was an academic programme representor, student ambassador, a key member of the Islamic Society she even rose to become Head



sister of the Islamic Society and engaged with a number of charity projects and events while at the University of Greenwich.

Originally from a Slovak rural village, PETRA PALKOVACSOVA has been studying Creative Writing and English Literature at The University of Greenwich for three years, focusing on poetry and drama. Her interests in art range from abstract painting to theatre direction. Petra has been shortlisted for the Street Cake experimental writing prize in 2021 with her prose poetry piece 'I Remember'. She has also been published in *Queer W/rites: A University of Greenwich Anthology* and the Street Cake magazine with her poem {[Bra(n)]kets}. Petra was published in the University of Greenwich 2022 Anthology, and she will be soon performing at the European Poetry Festival.

BETH E PEEL is an English Literature student aspiring to continue her passion in writing through poetry and prose, particularly by channelling her troubles through her writing to connect with people who may struggle similarly. Her enthusiasm towards this art has inspired her, hoping to be able to share her passion through teaching in the future.

JOSH H PHELPS is a third year student from south-east London, studying Creative Writing and English Literature. He has previously been published in the London Magazine's young writers' program and is a co-founder and editor at the new student-run publication, *Ludere Terrum Londinium*. Josh's work is often heavily influenced and inspired by music, particularly by the likes of David Bowie. Josh is also a musician himself, with plenty of experience and skill as an amateur guitarist and songwriter in a wide variety

of rock and indie genres, particularly blues rock, hard rock and alt rock.

AZEEMA RAHMAN is a nineteen-year-old student from Luton who has been writing poetry and prose since she was eleven. She takes inspiration from small details and likes to make complex pieces from them. Writing is at the centre of her life and most of her ideas come from random thoughts at the worst of times, like when she is about to fall asleep, or in the middle of a walk in icy cold weather, something else she particularly enjoys. She hopes that one day her thoughts and ideas can be shared with others who relate or can teach others about different life experiences.

RUBAH RAFIQ RATHORE is an enjoyer of all arts. From painting to writing, she has always found pleasure in expressing her thoughts and feelings through various mediums, especially poetry, which she likes to call 'formal rambling.' Poetry has allowed Rubah to transform her past experiences into written art that she posts on social media under a pen name. In her spare time, she is either busy daydreaming about the romantics residing within art and literature or she is busy daydreaming about her favourite fictional characters. Rubah is also an avid fan of pink, however, you'll never find her wearing it.

DESANTILA QERIMAJ RRANXA was born in Shkoder Albania. She studied music/cello instrument in her native country for twelve years, before continuing cello studies in Conservatorio Cesare Pollini, Padova Italy. For many years she played in symphonic and philharmonic orchestras in Albania, Italy and lastly in London. During all this time she never lost the passion for books, especially

poetry, taking part in different poetry competitions in her country. In 2016 she was a co-editor to the short prose book *Fryma* published in Albania. Lastly, in 2019 she published her first book of poetry in Albanian language. She lives in London from 2011 and is a second-year student studying English Literature with creative writing.

MELISSA RUSSELL began her pursuit of a third level education in the direction of neuroscience before discovering that her interest falls more towards hypothesised psychology than biology, especially theories about the mind faced with the fear of the horror genre in storytelling. She can now be found doing this by writing macabre stories, poems, and scripts for and during her Creative Writing course at the University of Greenwich.

MADÉLINE SALTER is a 24-year-old writer and actor, born and bred in Aldeburgh, Suffolk. She has been writing stories since childhood, having been perpetually inspired by the beautiful landscape of her home. In more recent years, she has forayed into the charmingly challenging world of poetry and has found her writing has taken on even more depth since exploring this medium. Her work speaks of the hold history, nostalgia and nature can have on us.

ÉRICA SILVA, born in 1989 in Lisbon, is a mother of two and student of Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. Her goal as a writer is to empower African children and young adults with her words. She wants to research and explore the impact of the Cape Verdean culture in the western world. With this work she hopes to create inspiring children's books since there is a lack of literature for children in Cape Verde (West Africa islands).

Music and painting are of big importance to her and she practices meditation and yoga to maintain mental health.

MADONNA TADROUS is a 21-year-old third year English Literature student from Essex. She has various interests, including the art of reading and – when lightning strikes her— the world of writing poetry.

ILIAS TSAGAS is a Greek poet writing in English and in Greek. His poems have appeared in *Ambit*, *The Mechanics' Institute Review*, *Beir Bua Press*, *SAND*, *FU Review*, *Tint Journal*, *The Shanghai Literary Review*, *Poetry Lab Shanghai*, *Plumwood Mountain Journal* and elsewhere. He is studying towards a PhD in the Business Faculty, Department of Accounting and Finance.

ANDREA ULIBARRENA is a third year Creative Writing student who has been passionate about telling stories since she figured out how to hold a pencil. Her favourite genres to write in are magical realism and science fiction, and she loves dark-but-hopeful stories that explore the intricacies of human relationships, emotions, and mental health. During the 2020 lockdown she self-published a short novella, a queer coming-of-age story set in a fantasy world, titled *One Wish*. This is her second time being published in the Greenwich Anthology.

From the moment ELENA VALENTINOVA was born, life started playing with her the crash and rise game. Life was an unfair player, didn't give her a rule book, or a guide. Instead, he took her on a roller coaster journey. Her CV is colourful as a Picasso picture. She used to travel with a lot of luggage, but now she carries only her

true self... She is just an ordinary human with ordinary dreams, desires, fears... and meanwhile something rare as magic. What she hopes is more people to see that we all are... an extraordinary mix of good and bad, of black and white magic.

Jamaican born, British raised, TAGERA WILLIAMS loved Jaqueline Wilson books and Louise Rennison's *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging* growing up; it is novels like these where her sense of humour and being able to relate to others is derived from. She is currently studying English Literature and is hoping for great things!

CHARLOTTE WOOD, aged 18, is a first-year creative writing student from Essex who jumps at the opportunity to write whenever she can. From scraps of poetry in her notes app to whole stories jotted down in notepads, Charlotte is always writing something or other. She hopes to one day be a journalist and published author. In her spare time, she submits pieces to various Instagram magazines and blogs. A favourite style of writing for Charlotte as an avid concert goer is music reviews which she hopes to incorporate into her future career.

HOLLIE WILSON is a nineteen-year-old writer who grew up in Essex. She moved to Greenwich to study creative writing and is in her second year at the university. She has always had a love for fiction, ever since she read Enid Blyton's *The Enchanted Wood* as a child, and her passion for poetry arose when she encountered Sylvia Plath's work on Tumblr. Hollie mostly writes prose poetry but is currently working on her first novel – *Growing Pains* – which is a coming-of-age story about navigating the stormy waters of adolescence, and how DNA doesn't make a family.



ADELA XHEZA is a first year English literature student who is writing poetry constantly, with a heavy inspiration coming from mythology, her own practice and beliefs as a pagan witch, and a love for expressing the feminine urge to run far into the wilderness and never return. Finding a way to make the ephemeral concrete and to share her experiences and emotions is why she writes, why she reads and why she has fallen in love with poetry. She is still in shock that she has managed to achieve one of her lifelong dreams of becoming a published poet due to this anthology.



ISMAIL ZAMAN is a second year English Literature student at the University of Greenwich. He enjoys using writing to purge emotions and thoughts. He believes it possesses the capacity to have transmutational qualities both within yourself and other people depending on how you use it. Writing is something that he aspires to take more seriously to be able to develop the necessary skills to be able to take on larger projects. He also takes pleasure in composing music whenever he can and being able to make progress through practice and repetition.



