

ANTHOLOGY

2021

Creative writing from
the University of Greenwich

edited by

Favour Agboola, Benny Ashmore, Anne Blombach, Andreea-Alexandra Bucioaca, Nicole Butler, Rebecca Cavanagh, Olivia Corley, Bryoney Coulson, Robyn Devon, Corina Duma, Naomi Green, Tai Halden-McKeown, Isabel Marshall, Lucas Melo Braga, James Mulholland, Tom Porthouse, Samantha Rainsbury, Kayathri Ravikumar, Madeleine Mercy Richardson Graham, Georgia Rowe, Mariana Santos Pinho, Amina Shaikh, Elisha Sharp, Charlie Walden



First published in 2021 by the University of Greenwich, London

This anthology has been compiled and edited by students of the contemporary publishing module of Creative Writing BA Hons, University of Greenwich, with the help of Galley Beggar Press

All rights reserved

© Sumiya Ahmed, Mahima Anjum, Benedict Lucas Ashmore, Aatika Ayoub, Shaun Barnes, Zoe Barry, Alycia Bell, Marie Bernhard, Anne Blombach, Gemma Borda, Ryan Bryce, Samantha Burton, Nicole Butler, Emily Castelino, Rebecca Cavanagh, Zarin Choudhury, Olivia Corley, Lily Dent, Robyn Devon, Corina Duma, Laura Evans, Rebecca Filsell, Emily Fisher, Aleksandra Gatz, Naomi Green, Kayleigh James, Lauren Johnson, Kyra Kruk, Nele Leitolf, Lucas Melo Braga, James Timothy Mulholland, Emilija Paulauskaite, Alice Peters, Mills Porter, Samantha Rainsbury, Holly Roff, Georgia Rowe, Mariana Santos Pinho, Elie Sharp, Tierney Isobel Shave, Caitlin Siebel, Sunzida Uddin, Pippa Veck

The right of the above authors to be identified as the authors of their work therein has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent, in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published, and without a similar condition including this condition imposed upon the subsequent publisher

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-913111-15-1

Typeset by Tetragon, London

Printed in the UK by TJ Books, Padstow

CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	7
II. POEMS	9
<i>Sumaiya Abmed</i>	11
a woman's nature; the art of love (& war); Stitched; Ignorance is bliss and blindness is glory	
<i>Mabima Anjum</i>	16
I am...; Traveller; January First; Label; Ghazal; Tablets; Terrorist	
<i>Benedict Lucas Ashmore</i>	23
Ghazal for the Lost Boys; Golden Guernsey; Summer; Haiku For a Broken Ornament; High Rise	
<i>Aatika Ayoub</i>	28
A morning's moment	
<i>Alycia Bell</i>	76
the fish jumped to salute me; Harsh	
<i>Zoe Barry</i>	33
Ode to a rose	
<i>Anne Blombach</i>	34
definition of freedom; English small talk (Ghazal); relationships; youth	
<i>Ryan Bryce</i>	39
parasite; good grief; lunar cycle	
<i>Nicole Butler</i>	44
Not to be loved; You vs I; A note for my love	
<i>Rebecca Cavanagh</i>	47
Lingua; A man and his Labrador	
<i>Zarin Choudbury</i>	49
Us; Don't Blink; Falling; Wander	
<i>Olivia Corley</i>	53
Lost; Writing on a rainy day	

<i>Lily Dent</i>	55
Kisses; Love is...; Who am I; Wild fire; Glitter	
<i>Corina Duma</i>	59
Small disappointments; The Cloakroom Counter; Turquoise Ring of Letterbox Fame	
<i>Rebecca Filsell</i>	63
Anti-Sonnet; Curiosity; 999; My Mother's Tongue	
<i>Emily Fisher</i>	67
Enchanter's Nightshade; A Short Ode to the World	
<i>Aleksandra Gatz</i>	69
Cyclothymia; the only love i need; selenelion; amusement park	
<i>Naomi Green</i>	74
I Wish the World knew what it had Just Lost; 140x130cm; Burned Bridges only Light the Way	
<i>Lauren Johnson</i>	79
The Year of a Breeze	
<i>Kyra Kruk</i>	80
You Are Here	
<i>Nele Leitolf</i>	83
for my shower because showers need poems too	
<i>Emilija Paulauskaite</i>	85
Autumn; Visions; Poison & Antidote; Realisation; Marbles in the Sand; Wave; Mother's Lessons; Love	
<i>Alice Peters</i>	89
To My Daughter	
<i>Mills Porter</i>	91
The smell of rain at 10:53pm	
<i>Samantha Rainsbury</i>	93
Homesick; Calle de los Cerezos; A weird thing; Ring 44	
<i>Georgia Rowe</i>	96
I Am Eager; I said I wouldn't do This; Blocks; Sestina; Caught	

<i>Mariana Santos Pinbo</i>	102
Rough; stumbling visions; untruthful hope	
<i>Elie Sharp</i>	105
Observations from the Underside of an Apocalypse; In Response to Hozier: 'Angel of Small Death & The Codeine Scene'; Thirty-One	
<i>Tierney Shave</i>	110
The Seasons: Spring; Summer; Autumn; Winter	
<i>Caitlin Siebel</i>	114
Dogbite	
<i>Pippa Veck</i>	115
Home; A Love Poem; Lust; Just Friends; Morning After; Red; Voice	
III. PROSE	123
<i>Sumaiya Ahmed</i>	125
Times Two	
<i>Shaun Barnes</i>	131
Afterlife	
<i>Marie Bernhard</i>	134
Katie; Untitled	
<i>Gemma Borda</i>	145
The Most Important Lesson	
<i>Samantha Burton</i>	154
Serpents in the Shadows	
<i>Nicole Butler</i>	170
A marriage	
<i>Emily Castelino</i>	181
Like A Broken Mirror	
<i>Rebecca Cavanagh</i>	191
Deeds of a mourner	
<i>Zarin Choudbury</i>	200
Gone	


<i>Robyn Devon</i>	202
The Last Girl in Town	
<i>Corina Duma</i>	217
The Irredeemable Qualities of Mrs Florence Albion; Tornado Season; MEAL FOR ONE	
<i>Kayleigh James</i>	234
Owed; The Bad One; Friend	
<i>J.T. Mulbolland</i>	238
23.01 11:50am; Benny and Jem	
<i>Holly Roff</i>	266
The Escalator	
<i>Georgia Rowe</i>	269
Meetings	
<i>Mariana Santos Pinho</i>	274
anti-gravity; 3 a.m.	
<i>Sunzida Uddin</i>	277
Maya of the Sea	
IV. SCRIPTS	281
<i>Laura Evans</i>	283
The Life of Riley	
<i>Lucas Melo Braga</i>	290
Trading Places	
<i>J.T. Mulbolland</i>	299
Almost Who	
V. NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS	307

I. INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 2021 Greenwich Anthology. Despite the uncertainty of the world we find ourselves in, this year's anthology will show you that writing is one thing which has not, and never will be, defeated.



Before you delve into these creative works, it is important to note that the achievements of the writers in this anthology shouldn't be understated. As we all know, this year has not been the easiest. Through the pandemic, many of our authors (just like many readers) have faced tough challenges in their personal, work, and academic life. Yet they've managed to create work that invites readers to escape from the realities we've all had to adapt to.

Unlike previous years, the team working on this anthology have also been unable to be in the same room as each other, making the creation of this book more challenging than ever before. Every decision was made through a computer screen, as our team had to adapt to a project that usually requires face-to-face contact. The anthology, and submissions, are also typically advertised through posters around the campus; however, most students were unable to access the university this year. This minimised our advertising opportunities significantly. Initially, we were even worried that



this would lead to fewer submissions – but our writers were not deterred, and we are grateful to have gathered the best of our students’ creativity for this year’s collection.

We now hope that you find some sort of normality and comfort within these creative pieces; we did when we were editing, and we hope it provides a provocative and satisfying snapshot of the endeavours of students’ university-wide, and their talents as writers and publishers at the beginning of their careers. We’re delighted to present to you an exciting anthology of stories, poetry and scripts and we’d like to thank all who have dedicated their time and efforts into the anthology. We’d also like to thank you, the reader, for picking it up. Now, make yourself a hot beverage of whatever you prefer, sit back, relax, and enjoy...



II. POEMS



SUMAIYA AHMED


a woman's nature

the women in my family
are all peaches and cream
shades of ivory and gold
glistening like a bronzed dream
when the sun casts her glow over our motherland
the women in my family plant their feet in the
depths of the earth
the rich soil gives in to their demands:


of new life, of freedom, of teaching

the women who come further down the line
to never sacrifice their love
to never bend their spine.
so they know they are a part of
something great, a lineage of women
proud of their strength, who dig their toes
into the roots of womanhood and survival.
and strength.


they sanctified our blood and heritage
with the idea of choosing ourselves over
greedy, soulless men always taking, taking,
taking – never giving, never compromising,
never listening, never understanding.



I bathe in the sun-drenched dreams of
my ancestors, whispering a sun-kissed prayer for their ears,
doing everything
they were never allowed to do.
I can never be uprooted from the line of
women before me, or taken from
what made me
it was their sacrifice and compromise
that helped me be free in a land
so different from theirs, but still buried
with the earth bowing to their prayers
their blood humming in my veins.



nature taught me
to survive against
men's brutality
and showed me
the
cost
of
compromise.



the art of love (& war)

after 'the kiss' by auguste rodin

the taste of forbidden fruit is
sweet on your tongue
the whispers of Eve's garden, floral-poisonous
the serpent does not exist here, only
our love, my love.
you buried the wilting flowers
into my chest, fingers a gentle touch.
Lancelot and Guinevere were nothing
more than a tragic love story—
we will be so much more.
this kiss is hell in heaven
the start of a war
between us and him.
between him and you
I choose you.

Stitched

you burned the crescent moon into
my mouth the first time you kissed me
held my jaw wide as if you were
trying to pour the entire world inside
it tasted like the fresh wound of healing
the first thread woven
to stitch together and unbreak a mess
of ghosts trying to forget, a lament
of him choosing her or her or her.
your hands held me like a china doll or
a fragile animal, easily spooked, easily
broken, easily attached.
easy.

I have swallowed your words
choked on the feeling of love as it
emptied out of my belly, a pool of
dead flowers reborn, unhurried.
you brought to life a fighter
a sailor's touch, inking a paper boat
forever into my skin, etching the memory
of us or what could be or what should be
or what will never be into every kiss.
you emptied yourself inside me
left behind a purple-red bruise the size of a fist
or a kiss, or a wish. or maybe it was all just me.

Ignorance is bliss and blindness is glory

'she's a strange one', they used to murmur
an undertone of laughter in their voices
a conversation starter filled with smarter words and raised eyebrows
it was all so strange and stupid – thinking i was deaf dumb and mute
when really i wasn't looking for a friend or anyone to talk to
i had always preferred to stand away from the crowd
but my mother wasn't proud
of the daughter she had
and in all honesty it made me sad
i tell myself she just wants better for me –
to let me be something more –
more than what i am now
but it was brutal as fingers sharpened to claws
and my smiles became few and far between
unable to actually mend what had been lost
months later and i remember
ignorance is bliss and blindness is glory
i had neither
eyes wide open and i have finally learnt
that wars could be over soon but the battles have just begun
and these sad empty days will always be
a part of my life
and that scares me.

MAHIMA ANJUM

I am...

I am loyal to none but one.
I wait from dawn 'til dusk for her,
to crawl into my soft arms.
I capture her tears, inhale her coconutty hair,
as she holds me close.
I am her comfort when no one's ready to listen,
her protector when she's busy dreaming.
I fear the day I can no longer satisfy her,
and shield her from the miseries
that prevent her from sleeping.
I fear the day she won't return
and I am nothing but a forgotten goose down.

Traveller

Rise to helicopter view
look below you
at what's left
'til you disappear into deep air
watch the river dance
as the free-spirit trees gleam
watch the mountain shout
'til rain soothes it
watch the birds sing
while crabs search for their purpose
watch people contemplate our fading footprints.

We are merely travellers.
Who will remember us?

January First

We'll go soon, he promises
we'll go when the birds sing
when the moon glimmers
when the owls hoot
when no one else is around
we'll climb mountains
We'll visit cities

But what if soon never comes?
What if death forces us apart?

Trust in time and the year's doors shall open for us
until then, have a little patience
for the doors are surprises
with every entrance, a new challenge
a new beginning and a hope for another tomorrow.

Label

'Teach me about Islam,'
no one ever says.
They make their judgement
from what TV displays.
The wars, the bombing and the broken homes,
terrorists, extremists and civilian casualties.

Negative charges thrown like bonfire.
But no one wants to listen to what we have to say.

I might wear a headscarf; he might wear a thobe
you might leave your hair on show.
Inside we're all just searching for open arms
for someone to say we're all the same.

Ghazal

I always told myself to live freely
when the world behaves rudely, smile freely.

I knew happiness was imperative
so I gave in to my desires freely.

Life contained many heavy obstacles
some were hard, others let me pass freely.

Along the river, into the blue sea
my delicate wings glided freely.

My small heart tore open repeatedly
sometimes that stopped me loving freely.

I turned to kindness as my remedy
like the moon that glimmered freely.

So Mahima, continue to spread kindness
for that will let your heart soar freely.

Tablets

Their thoughts, their words and their voices defeated me.
I soon became a girl who no longer wanted to breathe.
I jumped out of bed, fed up of crying
and replying with nothing but silence.
I laughed as I took a fresh packet of 32 tablets and emptied it
my small palms covered in flour, could no longer be seen.
I needed this headache to stop so I took them all at once, without a
second thought

*

Your words, your voice and your accusations were the icing.
I pray you one day understand that because of you
I too, like the cake, crumbled into pieces
until nothing was left but mould.

Terrorist

'Show a bit of your hair,' my gran said
'Wear tighter jeans,' my sister said
'Get into a relationship,' my friend said
show the world you're not a terrorist
be like every other girl
and just try to fit in.

'But why?' I asked
to protect you from the cruelty of an intolerant society.

'But why?' I asked again
no one answered.

Is this because of Tommy Robinson?
Boris Johnson or Donald Trump?
Because they assumed I was repressed?
Or because their expectations didn't fit with my religion?

Still no one responded.

Who are they to question my choices?
Who are they to judge the attire I wear? or what's on my head?
If no foul language leaves my mouth,
no discrimination departs my soul.
All my religion really teaches me is to spread peace.

So I thank them for the advice
but I'll stick to being me
and live my choices freely.

BENEDICT LUCAS ASHMORE

Ghazal for the Lost Boys

Slick bodies pirouette in the shadows,
hips grinding to Roxette in the shadows.

The maddened club-crush leaves me overwhelmed,
you light my cigarette in the shadows.

Joy's lost on the materialists, my dear,
leave Marie Antoinette in the shadows.

Tear off your shackles, shatter closet doors –
Be gay! Do crime! – bloodlet in the shadows.

We wander down the low-lit passageway,
find promised tête-à-tête in the shadows.

If sex is love, and love's a game, I'll play
along – Russian Roulette in the shadows.

Take care, my fierce bright bird, for here's the rub:
French letters save regret in the shadows.

Now find a Blessing for yourself: my Light –
ignore the marionettes in the shadows.

Golden Guernsey

When we arrive on this little island,
so almost France, we are welcomed 'Bianvnu'
by Breton-English accents at the port and
with the sun high and heavy on our shoulders,
we drag reluctant suitcases past farmland,
past towering, diffident corn in neat rows
– an assembly of whispering greenagers –
a meadow repurposed as car park,
the rumble of tractors faint in our ears, past
an ancient hedgebound horsebox rotting
in the bushes, guarded by crows
and brambles.

Then the oilcloth banner: 'Goat Show This Saturday!' –
in an empty field girdled by thorny tangles.
The knee-high grass of the lea
will be mowed, marquees erected, pens
and lines marked out. There will be a beer tent and
hot dogs, an ice cream van – maybe even a band?
My imagination spirals – the reverie deflated
by insistent buzz of blackflies and
a thirst made for draining rivers.

Four days fly by, languid days of beach ducklings, fattened
on seaweed; sweet crab salad and garlicky
lobster; beadlet anemones clinging to
life in rocky crevices; buttered Gâche,

Bean Jar and glorious cream; swims
in deserted coves and salt sticky hair;
ospreys riding thermals above us
as we dry off in the sun, silver aeroplanes overhead
to remind us we are not alone; memories
of wartime occupation marking time on history's
parade square; island folklore and
a chapel built with clinker and crockery; days filled
with us and the cliffs and the wind
and the shaded fairy glens and stone
tombs of the first islanders.

Saturday arrives with the scent
of freshly cut hay and roar of trailbikes
along the road. We leave after breakfast
wearing sweat and sunblock overcoats and
impractical sandals which struggle against
the overheated tarmac – schklik-flop, schklik-flop, schklik-flop.
When we approach the field, goat musk
and plaintive bleating thicken the air,
in competition with a tinny, stop-start
megaphone commentary.

The grass has not been cut. I smell no hot dogs,
and there is no beer tent. Refreshments are dispensed
from the back of a ramshackle trailer; t-shirts, jam
and honey from a wobbly trestle table. No band plays.
Ice cream is a distant dream. But the goats are magnificent
– golden! The pens hold treasure, a circus sideshow
of flaxen-bearded ladies, their paradoxical chins jutting

beneath cephalopod eyes, distended nipples protruding
from their burnished skirts. They exist only
because 'the bravest woman in Guernsey' kidnapped
their ancestors from hungry Nazis
and raised them in a hidden glade. This
is no ordinary goat show. This is island Pride.

We stay for the goat history lesson, half an hour
of goat petting, two rounds of goat-judging, ten
samples of goat fudge (revelation!), one outbreak
of goat war – casualties: one broken horn, one scratched flank,
three wounded goat egos – then leave with pink
necks and sugared mouths and longing for icy water.

When we return home, the sun has retreated,
the sky is gunmetal and the pavement slick
with the city's juices. The fudge has melted
in our bags and we are footsore.
I dream about the goats for weeks.

Summer

Ice crackles within
a frosty tumbler, moisture
trickling down, some paths

Haiku For a Broken Ornament

A bauble drops and
splinters fly. The Christmas tree
is indifferent

High Rise

In the middle distance the cloud parts
to remind the sun of a particular hill.

From this vantage point two seasons exist
simultaneously: ombrous winter and summer fire.

It is impossible not to feel something – some
space – in the meat of the body that means beauty.

I shrug off a desire to die in that moment
and simply look at all the things the light does not touch.

AATIKA AYOUB

A morning's moment

The welcoming bubbling of grain,
An Earthy aroma,
That same one that saw Mahmoud Darwish to obsession.
Calligraphic clouds swim upwards from cup,
Tracing twirl and twist in the atmosphere,
They know no space unworthy of being stage to their theatrics,
Here,
All grace –
A dance ceremony,
to welcome the day.
I seek refuge in a corner of couch,
at the head of my bed,
this solitary a.m.
Mornings where my only company is solar,
I could've sworn everyone else in this town was asleep,
there must've been a soul or two awake at this hour,
A stranger companion somewhere on a balcony inhaling morning majesty,
in the kitchen brewing a steaming, sobering cup of liquid love,
in bed...
But we tell ourselves it's only us on this plane,
never wishing to disturb this sense of calm we found,
this stillness we've stumbled upon,
our little secret.
Nothing but the murmur of air conditioning

Soon, people would stir in their beds and shake off the sheets that
wish to hug them back into sweet slumber,

'Just five more minutes'

Just five more minutes,
and the sun would make her way higher,
no longer the low-lingering daydreamer I befriended this morning,

When she was almost town folk,
where she'd mingle with our airs,
morning prayers,
scent of the day's first coffee –
and its second,

I won't tell how you lazied this morning,

Nobody would know how close in proximity you were to us,
how humble,

How humbly you rose to the sky with the grace of God,

So high and so bright now, I can't with confidence discern your
outline, or figure out where in these vast skies you've made this
hour's temporary home,

But I do see the fruits of that brilliant body of fire,

Dressing us in your finest gold,

Everyone can now.

Share with us what's yours unsparingly,

What is your own of warmth...

It seems that, perhaps, even the world's most evolved creatures have
something to learn by tilting their heads upwards to the skies,

I'll make my notes.

ALYCIA BELL

the fish jumped to salute me

(for Gary John Hilden, 1973–2019)

I was skipping rocks and getting them stuck
on the moss that covered the lake-
my legs caught in the barbed reeds


when a rumble shook the moss and the reeds
and the murky sky right under me
like a gurgle in the boil of trouble
like a low guttural growl

and what could I do?
I braced myself,
held my breath
for the aftermath of tectonic grumbles –

but my body (oh my body)
my body appeared unshaken.

No chaos erupted from the lake
just the blanket of film blown off to catch a solar beam
and the cellophane crumpled in its heat.
The reeds snapped as the light withered them away.



And what had caused the tremor was no beast,
he was scaled and shiny as he thrashed through the waters.
No net with strength could catch him
and he stalked it all for his own,



but swam by me so I could touch.
He was not slippery
but gentle and soft and he puckered up an 'O' on to my hand
all in a comforting kiss-

I knew it could only mean hello as an unspoken goodbye
for I watched him thrive away,
cutting through his kingdom
with swift ease and the fish jumped high as he passed.

There was honour in his rejoice and there was life again to see.



Harsh

Should I share with you?
Capillaries rise and sting in the flush
and they spur on the warmth.
that boils in my cheeks,
blooms into carnations.
I finger the petals
and I massage them around.
With my touch, they drift up –
mix with undiluted expressions.
I blink and they compress and squeeze.
They're wrung out until droplets drip
to drench the slate of my chest.

And you, you blow flared breath,
harsh breath that makes skin flake
away at a mutual resistance –
all at a partition apart

and I can't coerce myself into your why.

ZOE BARRY

Ode to a rose

Perhaps, once, a rose,
Grew without thorns,

Perhaps, once, she stood,
Just alone as she was born,

Spike-less and unharmed,
And covered in peach fuzz,
Dripping in sweetness under the shimmering clouds above,

Perhaps, once, this rose,
Was tricked, and was mocked,
And taunted, and clawed, and brutally flogged,

Perhaps then she cried out to all those around;
'By this agonising suffering,
I shall not be tied down'

Perhaps she grew taller, grew stronger, grew brave,
And as she grew fiercer,
Along came the day –

When her thorns began to sprout,
A barrier they formed,
Now this rose is a warrior, and a woman transformed.

Yes she is beautiful, your heart she will bewitch,
But make no mistake,
She can cut you like a bitch.

ANNE BLOMBACH

definition of freedom


freedom is
no wall or fence
no force or tense
room to breathe
heart to beat

freedom is
free of restraints
free of control
free of dependence

freedom is
easy
freedom is
breezy
freedom is
deeply
misunderstood

freedom is
time with friends in the park
drinking a beer and leaving a mark
breathless laughs and open middles
trying to solve irrelevant riddles



freedom is
coffee at the shop on the corner



the whole room filled with murmur
that first sip of the bittersweet drink
swapping from keyboard to traditional ink

freedom is
fleeting
competing
retreating

in these strange and uncertain times
freedom is hiding
but not forever gone.



English small talk (Ghazal)

Where are you from? Oh, me? I'm German.
You are? You don't sound at all German.

I wish I knew another language
Must be so cool to just know German.

What's the one thing that you miss the most?
Nothing really, not even German.

I have always wanted to go there.
Can you recommend anything German?

What's your name? Anne, Annie, it depends.
So special, but deep down, I'm just German.

relationships

we laugh because it's funny
the way our minds wield their swords
against each other on the same team
tending to our wounds like a mother
or a tired nurse

reaching for our hands
like good Samaritans
wrapping our arms
like lethal snakes full of love

hot tears and heavy breathing
like the thunderstorm in our heads

the brawl is over
but it will never end

youth

burning our insides to quiet the war
each pull is a grenade thrown
the smoke is filling the room
engulfing everything in black fog
the danger is a compromise for the hurt
because you rather kill yourself
than let him know you're tired
the orange line hits your lip
where he was meant to be
your nose fills with comforting smells
shortening the time until the end.

RYAN BRYCE

parasite

tick tock tick tock
the parasite lives in his ear,
tick tock tick tock
gorging on what the boy can hear.

he is only thirteen
and he lives for two
a boy and his lodger,
burrowed. rooted. true.
the boy goes to bed at night
and the leech stays awake,
biding boy's time,
with his blood as the cake
of its dinner. the mains
are his thoughts and dreams,
and the starter is his finger
tearing at its seams.

tick tock tick tock
the parasite lives in his ear,
tick tock tick tock
gorging on what the boy can hear.

the boy decides by
his very own right
that the tick is his friend
and not a foe to fight
nor an evictable squatter
because he pays the rent

by giving his fingernail
a place that even hell-sent
it can rest and sleep deep in
the top corner of his ear
while he checks his own corners.
he's not alone in his fear.

tick tock tick tock
the parasite lives in his ear,
tick tock tick tock
gorging on what the boy can hear.

the boy feels its teeth
at twenty-five to ten
and seeks help from downstairs
from his own mother hen
who fetches the tweezers
and the invasive torch
and as she clumsily holds
the light between her teeth,
she sinks the teeth in,
and pulls out of underneath
a single layer of skin,
the friendly little tick,
and crushes its carcass
with her satisfactory click.

tick tock tick tock
the parasite who lived in his ear,
tick tock tick tock
grew heavy with the sound of his fear.

good grief

for jim moran.

the people you don't notice much – they leave
inevitably pre-your noticing.

he kept the bar stool in the corner warm,
he kept his car completely unremarkable,
but still his laugh could ring the bell from range,
and calm a charging horse from centre stage
and take the horse's legs from under him,
assign humility. apologise,
and then he'd get back to the sunday times,
complete the crossword, grin, and have his pint.

but now the stool is cold. the paper's ripped.
and the horses run again, but slower now.

lunar cycle

i look at the moon like she is my sister
and we share a sleepover conversation
from top bunk to bottom.

we talk about boys while i kick my legs
playfully over the side of the bridge
from top bunk to bottom.


i say to her, 'i know it's not a phase,'
and she laughs at me. she knows a little
from top bunk to bottom

and she tells me about phases. about how
they pass but they don't stop, and tells me
from top bunk to bottom

how i can look back at missed footfalls and
unsent texts but i can never go back
from top bunk to bottom

and change what i did or what i said. 'you
know when you're on timehop, and you look
from top bunk to bottom

at memories from seven years ago, and your
naïvety hits you as you look at your brother
from top bunk to bottom



and watch his mistakes but never intervene
because he has to learn the difference
from top bunk to bottom

on his own. now you get to make the mistakes.
and in time you'll know when you move
from bottom bunk to top.

NICOLE BUTLER

Not to be loved

Unless they love you,
you will not know what it means to be loved;
standing in the space of a door,
not open nor closed.

There is only one person
To complete your half,
only a moment between the ticking
of the clock's second hand.

You have to gamble with the experience of love;
Hold onto the hand you've been dealt
And you miss the ace.

You vs I

You say I am a Rubix cube
that has been left unsolved for too long.
The fun of trying to figure me out is gone.

I say I am a mathematic equation;
give me some time and thought and
the answer will finally shine through.

You say my thoughts are a bundle of knots,
unable to pull one string at a time,
the only solution is to cut around the knots.

I say my thoughts are honeycomb surrounded by bees;
constantly creating and working.
Time is needed for the final product.

You say my words are Morse code with
a thousand different meanings,
moving too fast to decipher.

I say my words are constellations:
take some space to find them,
pieced together to create beautiful images.

You say we can't work together.
I say I agree.

A note for my love

Find me at our spot on the beach;
down the road where the arcades
sing like sirens tempting you in,
where the sunset blessed our game of golf,
letting me win.

Past the beach store where the souvenirs glisten
like pirates' treasure waiting to be claimed,
where we brought our swimming shorts,
eager for the water on our skin.

Down the slope where the sand and grass merge,
forgetting each other's differences;
we held one another close,
avoiding the tricks of the sand.

On the beach where the sea caresses the sand
and whispers of the waves tickle your ears;
Where we sat and spoke about a thousand different things,
our secrets safe with the tide.

REBECCA CAVANAGH

Lingua

I say I'm not good at other languages
so,
I feel less ashamed for not learning
my Dad's Jamaican lingo.

Yet my stomach has a stoma of Greek origin –
the needle stabbed into my skin, the cannula, is Latin.
The catheters I use, Latin, too.
I say I don't know other languages.

I forgot I knew the ancient ones;
they have been with me since birth.
I have been enriched in the culture
from ward to ward, operation to operation,
It is etched into scars around my belly button.

My second language is broken and not official,
but I know Medical Terminology: the language,
the feeding tubes better than anyone.
I can speak another language –
just not the one you expect.

A man and his Labrador

A man sits on puddled slabs near Cutty Sark station.
Clothes more bedraggled than a twig in a waterfall,
a Labrador on his lap –
cone on her neck.
They're more tired than the last leaf in winter.

He calls out for change, joining the poker table.

No one answers,
as feet continue their morning march.

His voice is lost in life's game of Texas Hold 'em Poker –
begging for shelter,
but the dealer says, 'No pets allowed.'
The coins in his cup from the day before
are the wrong hand; they don't add up to a royal flush.

5ps and 10s – all useful, but he really needed a pound,
or
two,
for the jackpot.
A coffee in the storm and a treat for the dog.

The morning marchers continue on,
betting and raising the stakes
knowing home is warm –
one paycheck away from folding.
The man and his Labrador are already bust.

ZARIN CHOUDHURY

Us

The sun and frost melt into each other,
Like two strangers from different worlds.
They collide on an autumn morning,
Blending together as gracefully as spring.

Cold's blushing heart softens,
As snow becomes flustered water.
Summer cries tears of ice,
Losing its light everywhere.

My eyes gloss up with drops of rain,
And I smile as I gaze at the inevitable.
The two were just not meant to be,
I guess like you and me.

Don't Blink

Lonely trees stand still -
Misty breezes come out to mischief
And steal away more leaves

Falling

The spirited
snowflakes chatter
As they dance
down
To the chilly
ground.

Wander

Sometimes it's one or two or a group
Each with their own purpose.

They all share a parallel expression
One of fierce pondering.

Their lovely lips smile and talk
But it's their soulful eyes that speak and tell.

Some linger and think
Like the searching sun on summer nights.

Others speed straight past
Feet blurring, mind twirling.

Pretty thoughts orbit
As animated eyes feverishly dance.

They all absorb different art
Soaking in imprinting colours and shapes.

They gaze at the same things
But each vision is unique.

Artistic rooms...
Full of visiting people
Who are all living...
In separate rooms of their own.

OLIVIA CORLEY

Lost

I lost you before I met the kind misty eye,
with soft edges of dark green, whilst whirls of
grey blend in and illuminate in summer light.

I lost you before the velvet, ribboned dress which
tied delicately into a neat, plump bow,
which I wore elegantly on Christmas Day.

I lost you after our dull family visit to the zoo,
where the ship-shape dots are plastered
on its yellow skin, its neck stretched out to greet me.

I lost you after a muddy football game
that my brother scored five goals in,
the rain stormed down our cheeks aggressively.

I lost you during mushy sand grains that
creep into my shoes, squelching as I near,
the damp pier creaks in rhythm with the wind.

I lost you during the cream cardigan with
stained sleeves; red, yellow and blue acrylic
paint, that smelt of pencil shavings and white musk.

Writing on a rainy day

Raindrops race rapidly
for first place,
down my window
and onto the

roof tiles of the
extension that
is our kitchen.
They merge
into one as I type.

LILY DENT

Kisses

To think about how much I miss you
Is to think of all the ways to kiss you.
O I miss you. Slow
Long kisses
The ones that swell my lips
And move my hips,
That hold your face
In a tight embrace.
O I miss you. Soft
In sleep
Passes in a beat.
Kisses say goodnight. Graze
Giving praise, to parted
Lips made for kisses

Love is...

Kisses,
Cuddles,
Kept in bubbles.

Really love this!

Who am I?

I'm just a boy,
I'm just a girl,
I'm just somebody in a broken shell.

—

On the beach

—

That's where I'll be,
Hoping for a whale to come and swallow me.

Wild fire

Red runs riot – scattered, shattered, scorched.
Blending blazes bustle perished petals plentifully,
Kangaroos, koalas know god goes greedy –
Lustful for loss of life.

Cursing crackling whips which massacre and melt
Kick with karmas promised penance
Together tortured, defenceless, deserted,
Alone in an alight earth exhausted by our obstinance.

Wish wash waves wasted.
Time trembles then thrall
Crowded cities cough cries
Death of dog, daughter, daylight
Enormous erratic erosions of earth
Fight or flight the following flames?
Gone gladly goes green
Trepidation turns trees trivial.

All that we do seems to be menial.

Glitter

glitter falls
like tiny disco
balls
under streetlamps

Glitter makes a mess
one that I detest
this glitter makes me
sad

Glitter
Glitter
Glitter

What a sorry
sight
on a lonely night

CORINA DUMA

Small disappointments

Green eyeshadow one shade down of viper,
the absence of a daily horoscope reading in the *Metro*,
'high fashion' labels splattered all over the clothing
(that could otherwise be lovely),
curly-haired boys with bad attitudes,
the 'is that all there is?' expression on everyone's faces
one hour into the New Year,
passive-aggressive attention from a stranger,
boring articles that could've been interesting,
could've been interesting.

Not getting a text when they said they would text,
empty pages at the end of books.

Why?

Coca-Cola mixed with Chivas Regal,
Freshly painted nails –
chipped to fuck,
five minutes lasting an eternity, lasting an eternity, lasting an
eternity,
'It's already ruined so you might as well ruin it',
and you nearly do –
if only not for the consequences you'd hold yourself responsible
to endure.

The Cloakroom Counter

You used to own two racehorses,
you fucking adore black olives.
You're the type with a yacht,
you binging alcoholic.

You'd take the yacht to Amsterdam,
and very little else.
To admire 'the architecture',
locked away in the MacGyver's flat.

I can't stand your charisma.
It's nauseating to watch
how easily people fall for you,
but you always botch it up.

'Oh, they're fake, they're not my crowd',
you'd say at the cloakroom counter.
But I'm not that easily bought,
Even though you insisted with a bottle of Cava.

Turquoise Ring of Letterbox Fame

On a clear day you can see forever.
Forever from the pier, or eternity on the peak,
dwarfs me and my omens.

I walk a path of houses much adored,
they greet me.
And my thoughts they receive
through the letterbox of

the pallid shades of heaven,
this dream of silence and ghosts that float
in the shadows of my souvenirs.

This journey from door to door
bears simple gifts in tribute,
to thank,
 to cherish,
 to know,
those without a face or those who are
 not home.

Humbly though I attempt to soothe
my words are just letters,
letters just words,
spaces, and grammar, and maxims of
rapport.

You receive and you delight in my ditsy hearsay
(or so I presume),
because every time I reappear,
the steps garner twice the flowers of before,
and candles,
and paintings,
and the magpie's buttons.
I marvel at your efforts to keep me afloat,
though to take would be to spoil –
like boot-marks on crisp snow.

But one day,
so boldly,
bolder than could be conceived,
your hand's everlasting form reaches me.
Me. Me. Me. . .
Through the door
pinching together beaten metal and
a stone,
'Healing to the eye and soothing to the soul',
as you have condemned, and so it will be just.

REBECCA FILSELL

Anti-Sonnet

'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' they start,
Full of meaningless words lost in metaphors.
Don't tell me love is the thing of fairy tales and poems –
Like it's picturesque, & beautiful, & doesn't hurt at all!

Singers talk of dancing, but not stepping on your feet,
And poets talk of passion, but not all-consuming fury,
While my heart stutters to speak the words it assembles.
This pleasure in aching can't submit to simple phrases!

So don't do that thing – compare me to roses,
A summer's day, or count the ways!
For the spirit of our love cannot be contained,
Or constrained under words of joy and happiness.

Call me obsessive and crazy, and lazy in love – maybe,
But I'm not mislaid in this place of rose-tinted frailty!

Curiosity

Comforts of home hang from the ceiling
life suspended in time

You want to see.

Music whispers through the glass
– laughter causes condensation

You want to see.

Shadows twirling in candlelight
flames are exposed and burned

You want to see.

One shade obscured by another
and another, and another

But, you want to see.

You're now nose to nose
– save for glass in between

You can finally see.

Then the blinds twist
that world withdraws

And you can no longer see.

The vulnerability of visibility
the safety of obscurity

You want to see.

Fluorescent yellow
on a dull brick wall.

Wrong stresses on
darkened blue.

You go off in
hazy night lights
while I stay behind
in shards of time.

Still ill & still
ill-adjusted,

my soul rejects
this new world.

The muted tick
offsets the tock

& new normal flows
in anxious waves.

Now I just wait
for the flood to

carry me away.

My Mother's Tongue

I have my mother's tongue,
bitten, chewed – rarely used.
A string of words are stripped
from breath before they fall, to land –
new meaning on new lips.

I have my mother's tongue,
but this stutter belongs to me.
When I stagger before I start
you claim to catch my drift.
Known so well – I have nothing to impart.

I have my mother's tongue
though this lisp is my own.
Trains of thought fated to forget –
my words twisted to shape a cage.
Tell me again, is that what I meant?

Your opinion has become my fact
& one day I'm just gonna snap.
So no more Mr. Nice Guy.
I may have my mother's tongue
but that sting you feel, is mine.

EMILY FISHER

Enchanter's Nightshade

Slender, writhing, snake-like arms lure, caress &
hook. awaken the wild from fevered slumber
choking; strangers from the damp, dark season
born, reborn into a silver-lit night enticed by
temptation.

The enchantress of the cold night's hot impulse
beckons: creeps persistently, open to give & to
take, stars fall, drawn as if magnetised to the ugliest
enjoyment, clinging to cursed love with a spine of thorns
unrepentant.

Two sink into the moist pink flesh of one
fruit. the seed buried deep beneath the poisoned
pulp, devoured wet & afraid in a heavenly
unknown, angel-skin hearts of two falls into
one. & are gone.

Mars burns deep under a northern spell
as the sun attempts to break. the familiar fire of hell.

A Short Ode to the World

We sit, trying to understand
this invisible sadness, as swallows
chase through the churchyard.
We are strangers to the season,
watching the favour of nature
produce & cleanse
the silk of our decay.

Flushed confetti blossoms wake
& before we can stop, blink,
and carry the weight of our bodies in guilt,
these prayers scatter;
they become bubble-gum pulp
in the gutter.
You can chant them back into beauty –
a guilty love song to the world.

ALEKSANDRA GATZ

Cyclothymia

i feel high
high on happiness
energy running through my body
i cannot stop it
shaking legs
shaking hands
racing thoughts
i can only grasp one at a time
i grasp two and both are gone
f o c u s !

'are you drunk?', i laugh
i laugh a lot. i talk a lot.
doing everything seems not enough
my brain works twice as much
until it stops.

the low comes suddenly
there are no words.
why would i laugh?
getting out of bed is impossible
so i stay.
as long
as i can.
as long
as i have to.
music slowly puts my mind to sleep
all i can do is wait for the uprising

i feel like a robot
who cannot cry
until one day
i feel amazed by the stars
i start singing in my room
i smile and i know
everything will be okay

the only love i need

i need to learn what love means
so let me practice on myself
i gently start by touching my legs
fingers slowly dance on my skin

as i go up discovering more beauty
my body reveals the journey it took
to get me where i am supposed to be
all the gold lines allowed me to grow

i go up and stop to take myself on a date
mistreated enough i am my own lover
cherishing my body as it deserves
with all the love i used to give away

i go up and the journey gets harder
my chest feels heavy with shame
used to covering parts i do not like
i resist a temptation to hide myself

i go up ready to make my last stop
my eyes are full of the memories
i smile as i fall in love with myself
i promise to cherish this forever

selenelion

i like people who remind me of the sun
i am the moon
which does not shine on its own

i need people who remind me of the sun
i want to learn
how it feels to have a light within myself

amusement park

my mind is playing tricks
but i am not a magician
i am in the audience
watching the show
waiting for it to be over

i did not buy the ticket
and the audience is me
an exclusive performance

my mind is a rollercoaster
ups and downs
the world looks beautiful
when i am high
i try to remember this feeling

conqueror of the world
until i hit the ground again
with no seatbelt on

my mind practices knife throwing
the target is my shaking body
closing my eyes does not help
i still hear sharp metal cutting the air
i am trapped between the edges

as the knives are getting closer
i wonder
is it my turn next?

NAOMI GREEN

I Wish the World knew what it had Just Lost

Mum's complaining that our electricity bill is too high,
but since you left the lights have been off.
I keep finding hairs on my laptop that I should
throw away,
but I can't.
There's only a few left.

Four hearts were broken at once
in St Leonard's,

because the brown, white, black
that had moved up and down for fourteen years,
became still.

The vet told me it would be fast.
I didn't think I'd have ten seconds left
to take care of you.

I wanted to
hold you,
but I was afraid of how cold my
comfort blanket would be.

How strange that you woke me only
yesterday morning.
Now it's 9am and I'm waiting
for my door to creak open,
and it won't.

I haven't had the bed all to myself
since I was seven years old,
but I can't bring myself to lie on
your corner.

'She's in a better place now.'

'She was my fucking better place.'

I hope you know you were as much a child as me,
as much a part of the house
as the walls and the red staircase.

And finally, I hope you know
that there are four broken people
sat around an empty chair,
wishing life worked a little differently.

140x130cm

Who else would I type these soppy sentiments to?
No more car rides past the Bluebell Inn,
we're putting miles on our keyboards now.

I complained to the television channels
of the international hotel,
until they played a sexy, yet
s l o w
selection of music
that we didn't listen to anyway.

You had never had camembert
and I had never had anyone look at me like that.
Like I came with a countdown.

Sad summers melted into autumn,
when I asked for a label.
Although, I'd always felt that
the helpless smiles on St Peter's Street
were label enough.

You imagine competition exists,
but you forget
that they are blades of grass
surrounding my sunflower.

I walk on the grass
but I
reverently
step
around you.

If I stood on the sunflower,
everything would be hopelessly the same.
No one looks out of the window to see the grass.

Burned Bridges only Light the Way

You scratched your friend on the inside.
Mouth is my left fist,
pen is my right.
It's a wasted war
when your enemy's memory
had a rewrite.
Dummy didn't think I had a bite.

Man, I was just happy to hug you,
just happy to trust you.

Once a year compliments had me gleaming,
rest of the 365, had me feeling
less than you
for no reason.
Interfering, called it intervening,
jealousy never could stand to see healing.
Trapped, so I'd smile,
but inside I was
screaming.
Mama said I took too long to leave it.

LAUREN JOHNSON

The Year of a Breeze

Life begins presenting us with new opportunities
Gardens of consummate flowers flourish at our feet
Enigmatic creatures are born on our earth
This season writes the year's new story,
But a spring breeze is all I shall ever be.

The affectionate sheen of the sun makes my skin incandescent
Transient tides return again and again to our serene shores
My venturesome kites are ablaze with stippled skies
This season gives nature power over the land I hold dear,
But a summer breeze is all I shall ever be.

I am transfixed on the sun-flamed, time-chiselled trees
Families are blithe, jumping in the rain-soaked earth
Effulgent amber and Scarlett leaves blanket the grounds
This season encases a mosaic of change,
But an autumn breeze is all I shall ever be.

A pearled coat dresses the newly frosted landscapes
The Oceanic moon illuminates winter's rich morose skies
Diamonds of ice dance enchantingly with gold luminous lakes
I can feel how this season brings magic and wonder,
But a winter breeze is all I shall ever be.

The year reaches its end, but my journey is not complete
I will never abandon the world's precious seasons
For I must protect and preserve all their enchantments on our world
My love and desire for the role I have been gifted is beyond reason
So, a yearlong breeze I shall ever be:

KYRA KRUK

You Are Here

> *Home*

Walking down unpaved roads
Unlocked doors
You could map this town
Forwards, backwards,
both eyes closed shut

> *Change*

So you move to where
There's more room to breathe
But air fills your lungs with smoke
You move to
Starbucks and blood-stained sidewalks
A city of grey walls like blank pages
Buildings tattooed in history

> *Concrete*

You sit on stone steps
The rain meets you and
Leaves you cold and wet
Seeping into the bricks
Because memories won't keep you dry
And yet you refuse to buy
A goddam umbrella

> *Hurling*

On the tube, passengers sweat through
Underclothes and winterclothes
Standing so close
You dissolve into the same animal
All one pulsating mass of blood and organ
Claustrophobia and euphoria
Singular heart beating
You cannot breathe
And the train screams
Louder than your collective thoughts

> *Seeking*

You look for yourself
in shop windows
On mannequins
In mirrors in dressing rooms
littered with identities
that don't fit
In salons and magazines you flip through
You catch your reflection
In the eyes of passersby
and fall in love with strangers
Who will never know your name
And will never have to say goodbye
You search for a person
You've never met
In a city that never rests
to let you catch up

> *Trapped*

Streets wind like veins
Too narrow for comfortable living
Clogged like arteries
In ageing bodies
Pumped full of poison
Petrifying policies
Decaying in plain sight
No one took out the trash, so we sit
In the sickly-sweet smell of rotting doctrines
The door swings shut
And we are all locked in
Don't forget, all veins lead to the heart

> *London*

How lucky and cursed we are
To live in a city that is both dead and alive
A city that makes us choose
Are we dead or alive
Because to survive is to fight
To survive is to reach both hands out
To connect and detach and defy

NELE LEITOLF

*for my shower because
showers need poems too*

in the shower
i'm always afraid
that you're drowning

between rent, anarchy
orgasms and therapy
your kisses give me toothaches

and in the morning
i always dress the same old wound

let's go to the sea
it's the only thing that helps
without making me hungover

what i mean is
please put my bones
back in order

gently
stroke your lips
with black marker

write
a poem

my head is full
with things
people said to me
when i was fourteen and uglier
but less afraid

i remember all songs
i can't listen to anymore
because your
face
and breath
lives between the notes

the soundtrack of my steps
is a fire alarm
a dryer with shoes

constant
never ending
because you ran into me
with your dirty feet
and i don't shower alone

EMILIJA PAULAUSKAITE

Autumn

There is something so exhilarating about Autumn
the wind wrapping its arms around the trees and
the crunch of leaves beneath my feet

when I listen with my eyes closed

I begin to hear the laughter of a girl

who gave herself up to the city

as the memories unfold, I pick up on rhythms
that remind me of Shakespeare's sonnets

and when his melodies merge with the London rain
I feel more alive than ever

at that moment,

I begin to see the world once more

beneath its tainted images.

Visions

Red buses splash through the puddles—

they carry passengers, content in their visions
some have gloomy perspectives while others have
visions as bright as the buses.

I watch a passenger get out of the huddle
and leave through the exhausted door.

He spreads his yellow umbrella into the air
imitating the sun as he wanders through the rainy bliss.

The clouds are overflowing sponges—
the drips wash old streets of London


they remind the passengers still waiting for their
buses of their warm nests covered by windy gusts.




Poison & Antidote

You were a poison to my heart so I could be
the antidote to your fear of being left.

Realisation



I was hurt when you let me fall
and when you came back
like a sheet of paper lost in the wind, I realised
in the past, I didn't know you at all
not until I learnt to say *no*.



Marbles in the Sand

A dream is only a marble lost in the sand.
But if a marble is all we have, then that
will have to be enough.





Wave

You're a wave that keeps coming back to me—
a chipped shell embedded deep in the sand.

Mother's Lessons

My mother once told me:

Don't let your life write you. Make sure you write life the way you want it to be.



Love

From a young age we are taught that love brings solace to the one who needs it. And to be loved arouses a feeling far greater than pleasure. Far greater than material objects passed down through the hands of many generations. Like a glove, love is comfortable to wear. And the truth remains – we all find ourselves needing it when the frost begins to bite.

ALICE PETERS

To My Daughter

I don't know yet what I will name you.
Yes, I am aware that there are bigger challenges
but this is going to be the first test
I will face.

Do I name you after a woman I have loved?
Mould you into my grandmother,
endow you with burdens and hopes and love and grief
your body cannot support.
My name is a reflection of all the mothers in my family;
don't put all your expectations in one basket.

Do I name you after a woman I have hated?
Take a twisted name that I have cut with contempt-
Purify it.
It was not their fault they were beautiful.
Perhaps this is a different kind of burden;
I must learn that you are not a reparation to be paid.

I don't know yet what I will teach you.
Yes, I am aware that there are arts and sciences,
but the first lessons are those
we don't remember learning.

How do I feed your soil without
passing on the poisons in me?
I will shape the world to fit you and not

the other way around.
Give you your backbone, stronger than all of us-
There I go again with expectations.
In licking my wounds, will I not make you bleed?
Undoing my defects is holding a mirror
showing you where to scratch-
You are your mother's daughter.
The cracks in us are not patched with gold;
I will not let you be damaged.

I do not know yet if I will have you.
No, not until I can separate Frankenstein from his monster,
know if I am salvation or creator.
But if there is one thing I can say with pride
I am my mother's daughter.

MILLS PORTER

The smell of rain at 10:53pm

I don't like getting wet
My shoes squelching on the pavement
I don't like getting wet
Not one bit
But once the rain has passed
And I step outside
Or pop my head out of my window
I can smell memories.

I can smell the night we went to the pub
And giggled as neither of us could walk
Without holding each other up
And the streetlamps reflect off of the wet tarmac
The alcohol wearing off
And the night settled in at 10:53pm
Arms linked, breath evaporating in the cold
No council streetlight nor star could overpower your eyes
I remember feeling that anywhere could feel like home
As long as I am with you.

I can smell the day we sat on the beach
We sat on the only patch of dry pebbles left
I've always felt like the closest we can get to freedom, is the sea
But freedom does not mean 'alone'
You looked at me and said, 'There's no other place I'd rather be
than with you'
I couldn't stop smiling even though

The seaside shops were closed
Well, all but one
And we had drove for two and a half hours
At least we got to sing along to the radio together
Thanks for the Mr Whippy, by the way.

I can smell the nights we went to house parties
And danced until we were too drunk to read the time
At 10:53pm, slurred voices saying we should stay inside
We sat on the garden step
You held my hand
My head on your shoulder
You told me you loved me
And even though my bum was wet
And all I could smell was the wet cobblestone
I fiddled with your fingers
As I replied – 'I love you too.'

Walking me home
Just after the rain stops again
The night is not so scary by your side
You wait for me to lock the front door and wave goodbye
Each day you had to leave, when I went to bed
I opened my window
To remember it all again.

SAMANTHA RAINSBURY

Homesick

those marble summers.
I first went as an artist
then as a daughter

Calle de los Cerezos

a warm clay staircase
down. But for a towel, naked.
A shortcut took me

A weird thing

eyes squeezed from memory
split from words
but pretty
like shards
peeking through dead knuckles of the old house.
When you stay
it's love in two rooms
like pressing a bruise,
it's only half fun
so not now
I've outgrown pixie dust and youth clubs
so now reborn
with none of the wings
but all of the scars
the first bee that stung me would never win now.

Ring 44

I carry 'round
like a cracked shell in my shoe
an evening with a bent edge
barely beloved.
You made the walls bleed,
leaving prints of change and face
but you didn't notice,
living in that triangle tower.

It was then
carving through conversations
it passed;
trusting like a tyre swing.
Your call.
I paid in silence
to see you in the day
and not on the table.

GEORGIA ROWE

I Am Eager

I have always been solitary
I have always lived at night
I have always been descending
I have always been lethargic
I have always been blank

Something is lacking.
No, it was never there in the first place and never
will be.
The consciousness of cost.

To lose
What have I lost?
Everything
I am burdened yet I am buoyant
Maybe something is lacking that was never in my
possession therefore I do not miss it.

Full mind full house full rizla
The calling to run signals the oppression of the mother.

I said I wouldn't do This.

A shot to convert life with one broad plunge,
Submission to the risk taker is key,
There is nothing greater than the first lunge,
Chance opportunity if you agree.

Sharpness rises a surge of crisp danger,
We agreed we should not be doing this,
Plummet into joy for the remainder,
For that moment, at least, a fervent bliss.

But when the only option is to dare,
Time stops while frolicking in the encounter,
You find yourself distinctly unaware
In times that are bound to make you flounder.

So if you don't jump, then will you miss out?
Keep on chancing to fend off any doubt.

Blocks

A sentiment of incarceration,
Bound by those
Granular beige cuboids.
Liberation of thought
Denied

Clamber down the
Slabs of cinnamon
To where
Their new embodiment
Shepherds musings to safety

At last! In this
Asylum of cultivation,
The altercation in the attic subsides,
The cuboids
Form a new space for reflection.

Sestina

you must've known you could cause this effect,
what sort of bountiful braggart can't find a concubine?
the phenomenon of freedom seemed like a perk,
the certainty was a little harder to conceal.
so my rapid enchantment wasn't practical,
and yours was curbed, yet sincere.

my initial lack of enthusiasm was sincere,
and your ruptured reverie not my desired effect.
our constant contact craving was impractical,
and I never meant to be anyone's concubine,
you were supposed to be a one off I'd conceal,
this fact, I presume you saw as a perk.

obviously the copious capital was a perk,
not that my sentiment should seem any less sincere,
but the promiscuity made the thrill tough to conceal
and our illicit physical liaisons caused the effect
that I was undeniably your covert concubine
and every stolen grain of a moment was impractical.

not that I exposed I felt impractical,
I've always insisted our distance is a perk,
and you that you simply craved a concubine.
whenever I reveal my most sincere
revelations you shrug off my desired effect.
there's nothing *you've* had to conceal.

of course you would crave to conceal
our contact that, if confessed would be impractical
to say the least, never mind the eternal effect
of our oblivious and uncaring perverted perk
on her, with whom you vowed to be sincere
with, after learning of your first concubine.

so it continued, me some fool-proof concubine,
but as usual the life I make a bid to conceal
made me appear substantially insincere,
then coincidingly our chats became impractical,
and the entire transaction ceased feeling like a perk.
peering behind my scenes tends to have that effect.

a snag of sincerity and I'd've stayed your concubine,
even though the effect was callous to ask me to conceal.
I'll never be your practical, just a predetermined perk.

Caught

Another's anxieties perturb my perceptions,
my reason has remitted with unremitting
re-enactments of former faults and
hourly brain bulletins of accomplished
oversights

Each act unfolds accidentally in
sour scenes you'd least expect,
reaping repeat results from last time,
making me fidgety for last year's
feelings

Enter the predictions of a Drifter, a
loose let-up for flash until I'm
uncovered for coveting a lifted lover,
banned from borrowing until
reallocated

Life's determined it seems, to rework
the decade's regrets and recoup at
regular intervals to recognise results
once missed in bursts of
bliss

MARIANA SANTOS PINHO

Rough

This is not my coat
not ever since the first
damage

It was my favourite
and I didn't even
know

The soft silk
was replaced
by these disgusting
chiffon pieces

This coat is not
soft anymore

But I have to claim it
as mine

stumbling visions

I always try to
write something
but in reality
I only think and dream
and lose myself
in between

it's a limbo state
that feels like
sleepwalking in
the middle of the road
in rush hour

I find myself
following the
raindrops the clouds
left for me
and I keep chasing
those clouds

but they keep on
moving
whilst I'm standing still
finally noticing my
own reflection in
the window

is this where
I think or dream?

I can never tell

untruthful hope

you didn't knock
you weren't invited
but you still
let yourself in

you wore the face of an
angel
on a demon's body

and as a demon myself
I pretended I did not
know

your divine charm and
hypnotic words
glued my broken heart
together and I
let myself go

and that was the gateway door
you needed open
to suck the last light
out of me

you smashed me
against a mirror I
could not see

and left me to bleed over
the broken pieces of
crystalline glass that stole
the only thing left of me
myself

ELIE SHARP

Observations from the Underside of an Apocalypse

I.

A fatal goodbye is a festering wound. It is a dwelling scar across your lips. You have broken your arms in the embrace. Before they leave, they reach into your chest just under your left breast and they snatch a rib as a keepsake. Be careful of how many people you get close to. You only have so many ribs left to offer.

II.

The optimist was drowned, but not silenced. Optimist's old oxygen still infiltrates Pessimist's pool by way of breaching bubbles.

III.

Blue is a dialogue between two celestial prisms. It leads us back to the story that started it all. Blue heavens and blue waters.

IV.

Barefoot in the forest
rivers of diamonds traverse
the curvature of your cheeks

V.

Waiting at the end of a driveway as a young child. The yellow bus will break through the dewy air like a shark coming to eat the children. Fish carried in the belly. Jonah on his way to Nineveh.

VI.

Education starts from the waist up, moving to the head, then eventually to one side. The rest moults.

VII.

It is said that the collective unconscious is the source of all ideas. Despite the word 'collective,' it is a sacred altar where only the gifted are allowed to pray. A river to which only the righteous are given access. My throat is parched.

*In Response to Hozier:
'Angel of Small Death & The Codeine Scene'*

Blood is the golden drug
 mining for diamonds in the neglected tundra
 claws full of dirt and snow and chipping teeth on rocks
 gouge valleys marking scarred failings
 iron nails lining trails of lingering distress
 depressions in the mountains
 deeper in the tunnels
 vision lost to the veins
 knees buckle under the weight of Empty
 The Nothing is too much and the blood finds a new river

Thirty-One

Do not enter me.
There is no hidden meaning
no room for doubt
no lack of clarity
Do not enter me.

Period
if I were to use punctuation solely to denote that a phrase or a
command is the most important in this piece
that would be it
Do not enter me.

.
In this case the period
the single dot
not an exclamation point
not a question mark
just a dot
acts as the powerful signifier

I am certain that there is no other way to express the four words
that I hold closest to my bosom except to say them with such
confidence that chases away any criticism that may be directed
towards my choice of punctuation
Period
Do not enter me.

Period.

My certainty comes with a price for I can no longer say that I am a

free bird

tied down by a rock

tied down by a string

by a pin

by a book

by a flower

by a thorn

petals unfurling and gracing a sacred space that has been ruined

by graffiti pollution word of mouth execution of dripping crimson

lies impurities draining from my body

my vessel

my temple

Do not enter me.

TIERNEY SHAVE

The Seasons

SPRING

As new life begins
and blossoms do grow,
sun breaks through the dark clouds,
and warmth dismisses snow.

The colours are vibrant
with varying hues;
the reds, and the yellows,
and – always your favourite – blues.

You seem more like yourself
in the tones of Spring.
Like the flowers first bloom
of their new beginning.

The rain may fall often
or not fall at all,
but your smile is still present;
I can always recall.

Spring wasn't your favourite,
you much preferred sun.
Yet, that did not stop you
from creating your fun.

Your bright child-like smile
that never did fade,
not once fell from your face;
as if Spring had restrained.

SUMMER

The colours have changed now,
not as bright as before.
You still enjoy Summer,
never tire nor bore.

Things seem a lot better
in the Summer months;
fruit is riper, sweeter,
like the strawberries you grew once.

Blue and white merge as one
in the clear June sky.
You bathe in the rays, no
other season can vie.

High heat, unrelenting.
Yearning for a breeze.
Yet, you remain happy,
close-eyed under the trees.

You are more yourself in
the bright month of Spring,
but Summer is when your
Child-like-self truly does sing.

Glassy nights are blissful,
stars fill the vast space.
Yet, hollow is the void
that once held your place.

AUTUMN

The season of great loss,
one way to describe
the emptiness felt when
the Summer warmth has died.

Bright vibrance has now gone
and left in its stead,
bleak colours of Autumn
that blends orange with deep red.

Some find beauty in hues
that the fall months show.
I stand alone waiting,
for the first signs of snow.

Cold seeps into my bones,
the balmy warmth stole.
Yet, the memory
of your smile still warms my soul.

The trees are bare now, no
leaves to provide shade.
No blazing heat, either,
in the place you once laid.

Autumn arrives quickly,
but leaves sooner still.
The Winter approaches,
and I sense the harsh chill.

WINTER

I warmly greet Winter,
like it's an old friend.
As the blankets of white
tell the sad year to end.

The air is now painful;
the wind hits my cheeks.
Light does not stay for long,
and the days feel like weeks.

Your presence can be felt
all throughout the room.
Not one face un-smiling;
your kindness and warmth loom.

Winter is a hard month,
when you have lost one
that you love, but they're still here;
not all is said and done.

I know you're always here,
standing by my side.
Even as the seasons
change, to you I am tied.

Blankets of pure white melt,
the sun looks and grins;
we welcome a fresh start,
as new life begins.

CAITLIN SIEBEL

Dogbite

Do you remember what being
bitten by your father's dog felt like?

Soft flesh against white-chipped teeth—
sinking deeper, tasting the history of blood
in your veins.

And now here again, your hand caught
between porcelain teeth, your lies
swimming through the streams
of your body:

Just another dog with another mouth
from another lover.

Do you remember what being
bitten by your father's dog felt like?

You are not afraid of the sweet pain anymore.
Look at those dogteeth around
your wrist, that dogmouth poised to strike.

Look at the curve of your wrist:
the blood pumping through you
is hot enough to burn through bone,
and tonight, it just might.

Now close your eyes.
Let the teeth rend flesh. Let the dog bite.

PIPPA VECK

Home

Where is home? Does it lie on campus ground?
Or does it lie inside a childhood house?
Does it weave itself between waves of sound?
Or does it live inside your caring spouse?
Can you brush home's walls with your fingertips?
Or is it a cruel and crafted fiction?
Can it stop the pain with sweet morphine lips?
Or will it just become an addiction?

Home is dog walks by the beach at sunset
and mum-made meals to soothe a broken heart.
But home is in London, creating debt,
staying up late and working on my art.

Home lies between the city and the sea,
so I'm torn between a key and a quay.

A Love Poem

Love is calm but cruel.
It's cutting and cold
but caresses and cuddles,
content in your couple
until its callous climax,
when love runs cool
and kills the couple.

'You're a coward'
'You're a cunt'
Curse words collect
in throats made coarse

No longer committed,
caught up in captures
of love so careless,
now a tale of caution
for content couples

Lust

Lustful eyes lock
onto lower bodies,
lingering looks
of a lonely soul.

Logic lost,
left at the door
lying on hard floor
littered.

'I love you'
Lies.
'I love you too'
Lies.

Just Friends

You stare at me with fierce desire, just friends?
But your stare clings to her body. Just friends.

Home cooked meals, cups of tea, 'Where are you' texts,
my mind spins: hidden hook-up or just friends?

Jealous rage builds and burns, climbing my throat,
waiting in my mouth; remember, just friends.

Nothing more, we agreed, for the group's sake.
You said, 'I think we should remain just friends'.

But your arm snakes itself around her waist
when you think no one sees. More than just friends.

You blur the lines between friend and lover,
until it's all grey. Can't you stay just friends?

A shattered promise is all that is left.
Now I desire to be less than just friends.

He texts you, Pippa, with a 'sorry x'.
Ignore his message, hun. Sorry, just friends.

Morning After

I want to forget my feelings for you
I want to forget your soft-spoken lies
Return to when I thought they were true
When I thought the stars lived in your eyes
Because reality leaves me choking
Struggling to breathe and desperate for air
Tightening your grip and claiming you're joking
My life in your hands and you neglect to care

But I want to remember I can love –
Remember to free my heart from her cage
As strong as a raven and not your weak dove
To soar above you far from your rage

So I will spare myself the mourning veil
and will become a bride in a new tale.

Red

Red rivers,
red flames
through red
wood trees.

The world burns
roasted by the red
ravaged by the red
ruined by the red.

To stop the red
we drown with blue,
make the world purple,
try to be green.

But red flames rage,
fuelled by rich hands
recklessly spending
blood money.

Retreat to the grey
in cremated Earth,
for remaining alive
is redundant.

Voice

Silence.

Nothing more than croaks
for she (with mountains
of gold) needed more.

My voice.

Blended with her own,
my words, once home
to my tongue,
now adapt to hers,
captive in her throat.



III. PROSE



SUMAIYA AHMED

Times Two

The air is heavy with weed, sweat and the stench of Absolut Raspberry and some other cheap vodka you bought from the corner shop. Music is blasting from the TV as the four of you sit on the floor. Your back's leaning against the sofa, your knee just lightly brushing his thigh. Opposite you, Sylvie blows out a cloud of smoke, which rises and coils out of the open windows like a ghostly snake. Hugh takes the joint from her, muttering a soft 'fuck' when he has to light it again.

The bottles of vodka are on the coffee table; close to the edge like they're contemplating whether falling off it will be worth the end result, the spilt liquid pooling in the colours of shame and lust, desire and danger. You're the only one who doesn't continue smoking, shaking your head when Gabriel offers it to you. You took a few puffs earlier and felt a creeping headache rising behind your eyeballs, a wounded letter etching itself into your soul. A whisper of everything to follow. A warning.

You're drunk, in an off-balance-but-still-aware kind of way, in a way that makes you feel more confident but still out of your element. You're there but you're not there, and you're wondering what the fuck it is that you're doing. They shouldn't be here. He shouldn't be here. You shouldn't be fucking him in your bed. You shouldn't be giving him a hand job in the kitchen or getting on your knees for him in the living room. None of this is right. But in the moment, all you can think about is fitting in, thinking '*finally I'm in a group of friends*'.

You find yourself looking at Gabriel, lost in some conversation with Hugh, and think that his cheekbones may just kill you. His

eyes are the colour of sin and charisma, almost black, and his smile carves a crescent moon into your ribcage. Sylvie introduced you after you said *'sure, I want a quick fuck, he's hot'* after the anniversary of a heartbreak you were trying to forget. He appeared at your front door the next day, sleek and tall, towering over you as if he knew you would say a silent prayer and suck his dick – getting on your knees for him either way.

You were hungry and made creamy chicken and veg pasta, sprinkles of cheese coating it like first snowfall. In the kitchen, he watched you while you cooked and you talked about dreaming of a world where you could read and write for a living and he talked about his niece and his journey with depression. After you ate, you worshipped him with your body, baring your soul to his magic touch and he responded with his own worship between your bronzed thighs like a dream coated with magic and sin.

For two weeks, you were a floating star, wishing on lanterns made of fairy dust and glitter, falling for a godlike man who'd made it clear he wanted nothing more than pure sex. You knew you couldn't change his mind and found yourself falling – not in love, but in healing, in gratitude, in discovery of something more than a heartbreak that rips you apart at the seams. He made you feel desired, gave you the attention you craved, held you in his big hands like a delicate thing, a pretty flower or starshine and love in human form. Ambrosia to the gods, and he was god.

Drunken nights with him became poison, serpentine beauty shedding your silver-gold blossoming into a purple-black aura, and he pushed into you, his hand around your throat so tight you could gasp his name and hear nothing. The next morning, he left with a tender kiss, and returned the following evening, with Hugh and Sylvie in tow.

So now, you sit here with them. Someone suggests a game of Dares. Hugh downloads the apps and inputs all of your names. It mispronounces your name and you feign laughter.

The dares start off easy, but you start to feel uncomfortable. You don't want to play this game but you don't say anything. Awkwardness grips you like a vice. You don't want to feel like an outsider. A dare tells Sylvie to kiss Gabriel and cup his balls. She does. You look away.

A dare tells Hugh to touch the breasts of the two women in the room and rate them. Sylvie's a ten. You're an eight. You know your tits are amazing and inwardly roll your eyes. Gabriel sniggers. You and Sylvie are dared to kiss. Sylvie tells the men to kiss first. They do. She changes the subject and it moves onto the next dare. It tells you to kiss Hugh's neck. You do. Some dares are refused and articles of clothing are removed. You and Sylvie are down to your tops and underwear. Gabriel is in boxers and socks, Hugh only in boxers.

You've got drunker and don't notice the moments passing by. You're standing up somehow, swaying, and a dare tells Hugh to eat you out. Someone cheers. Sylvie says 'do it' and you find yourself looking at Gabriel. His face is impassive and you feel a sliver of fear sliding down your spine, an icy fog eclipsing your heart and vocal chords.

You don't say anything. You go into your room and Hugh follows. You stare at yourself in the mirror and then you're on your bed and Hugh has sunk to the ground, his face between your legs. You feel weird, like you're floating outside of your body – *'I should stop this. Say stop. Just tell him to stop and he'll stop'* – but you don't say anything. Sometime later, he moves, he wants to fuck you, you can tell. You shake your head. You say 'No. No sex'.

Someone knocks on the door and it's Gabriel. He asks for the condom on the desk. You feel yourself go still. He's fucking her.

'You sure?' Hugh asks you.

'No sex,' you repeat. He nods.

You swallow and sigh. You sit on your bed silently and somehow, without realising, you're dressed. You go out into the hallway. Hugh knocks on the living room door.

'Go away,' Sylvie shouts.

'One minute,' Gabriel says.

Feeling sick and disoriented, you go back into your bedroom, dragging Hugh along to keep you company. Suddenly he's kissing you and then you've fallen on the bed and he's got a condom on and he's inside you. You don't feel anything – not physically – you can't even tell his dick is in you. It's small but you see him move, you see him staring at you. Not blinking. Why doesn't he blink?

God, this is weird. You look away but you can feel his eyes on you. You feel suffocated. You lift up a hand and as if in answer to a prayer, he slips out. You shake your head when he moves as if he wants to try and get it back in. 'I don't want to.'

You get dressed. He gets dressed.

You sit on your bed and talk. You laugh.

Going back out into the living room feels weird and you know you should've said something but you didn't want to come across as a party pooper or a loser or a killjoy who sucks the fun out of everything. You look at Gabriel and he looks back at you.

'He couldn't get hard, babe,' Sylvie tells you. You blink. 'He only wants you.'

Gabriel laughs a little awkwardly; you shrug and then decide to text your best mate. You're silent and texting her everything that's happened. You tell her you feel as if you hate yourself. You go into

your room and leave the phone there, peel off your bedsheets, and grab your dressing gown and phone. A shower will fix this.

The water is liquid fire that burns away the touches from your body. You close your eyes and feel the droplets like hail on your skin, bleeding out the ghost hands. Ten minutes into your shower, your phone rings, blaring out your mate's ringtone. It's 'Barbie Girl', one you'd assigned as a joke but it stuck.

You stop the running water and grab your phone from the counter top, littered with body washes, shampoo bottles and other toiletries, and answer. You speak in Bangla. You joke with her and laugh. You step out of the bathtub and put on the dressing gown, one hand still holding the phone to your ear. After a while, you hang up after reassuring her you'll be okay, you are okay. You wipe away the water from the tiled walls and clean up the reminder of your shower and leave to get dressed.

When you're back in the living room, they're ordering McDonald's but you don't want any. They get you fries and an apple pie anyway. You play cards. Well, they play and you sit like a shell of a woman, throwing down any card. You fight back tears. At night, you curl into Gabriel and breathe in his smell. You know it's over.

The next morning, you wake up at the same time and have sleepy goodbye sex. You change the bedcovers again, then go into the kitchen and check the washing machine to see if you can fit anything else in there. Your breathing speeds up and you fall to the floor. You grip a nearby chair leg and try to calm your breathing. You feel like you're going to be sick. You shove the door closed and lean over the bin and dry heave.

You didn't want it but you didn't do anything to stop him. You can't call it that or name him that, because it isn't. It isn't. Yet every

professional you speak to will say it is. You speak to your other friend. She says it is. You don't think it is. It isn't. You didn't stop Hugh. You were all drunk. You talk to Sylvie on the phone, she says you're being dramatic and to stop accusing people because it could ruin their lives – and it isn't it. Gabriel says not to get his friend into trouble. You realise he's the type of man who will defend his friend, *even if* he is a rapist. Hugh says if you'd said something, if you'd said no, if you'd said stop, nothing would've happened. He says he's not a bad guy.


You should've said something. Because this is just regret. Isn't it?

SHAUN BARNES

Afterlife



Hector clung onto the railing for dear life while the transporter rocked to and fro. The sound was deafening. Lights flickered and sirens hollered in distress. It was like the worst roller coaster ever conceived by man. He felt his stomach lurch as the transporter dive bombed and somersaulted through the nether realm. Why did I put myself through this, he thought? I could have just stayed in and watched the telly. Finally, with a massive clang, the transporter landed. Hector picked himself up off the floor and dusted himself down. Straightening his glasses, he walked to the door. This was it. The moment he had been waiting for. He took a deep breath and left the transporter.

He wasn't quite sure what to expect when he arrived in the afterlife. Obviously, he had heard the usual clichés. Fluffy clouds, angels playing harps and all that shit. But nothing quite prepared him for how ordinary everything looked. He was standing in a blank room. Completely white. Not a mark or a crack or a blemish anywhere. There was nothing in this room except for himself, the transporter he arrived in and an odd-looking contraption standing in front of him. A large, rusty metal box sat on top of the spindly legs of a tripod. On the front of the box was a handprint and two tiny light bulbs. Curious, Hector thought. He walked up to the box, rolling up his sleeves, and tentatively placed his hand on it. It was cold to the touch. He could hear a faint whirring coming from inside. He waited with bated breath. Finally, the whirring stopped. The silence that followed was almost deafening, broken only by the sound of a loud siren. Hector's eyes darted back and forth. What was going on? He looked down and saw one of the lights on the box lit up. He





barely had enough time to note that the light was red before he was suddenly and violently thrown backwards. The white room disappeared from view, and his back hit the wall with a loud bang before he clattered to the floor. Dazed, he got to his feet and his mouth fell open. He was back in his room. He stared dumbfounded. This could not be happening. All those years of work, all that planning, all that struggle, only to come up empty handed. Needless to say, he didn't take this with great dignity. The neighbours had gossiped over the screams and wails coming from his house for at least a week.

Hector lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. What was he to do? He could build another transporter, but the first was such a drain on his resources. Building a second would surely take longer. But he couldn't just give up. He had come so far. Just not far enough. He sighed and turned over. There was no point. His life's work was down the drain. There was no point to life anymore. Wait. He jolted upright, his eyes widening. That's it! Without a second's hesitation, he ran to the bathroom and turned the taps on, filling up the bathtub. He then rushed downstairs to the kitchen, grabbing the toaster and yanking it from the plug socket before returning upstairs. Without even taking his clothes off, he jumped into the bath, plugged the toaster into the wall and held it above the water. He grinned. This plan was simply foolproof. And with that, he allowed the toaster to fall from his hands.



He awoke, tingling slightly, but otherwise fine. He looked around and shouted with joy. It had worked. He was back in that same white room with the metal box. And there was his transporter, right where he left it. He sprang to his feet and hugged it. Not only could he now explore the afterlife without interruption, he also had a guaranteed way back to the world of the living once he was done. He stood back and took a few deep breaths. Okay, he thought. Focus.



Don't get ahead of yourself. You may have outsmarted the forces of fate, but now you have a job to do. He turned back to the metal box and, as before, placed his hand on it. The whirring sounds started again. He closed his eyes, bracing himself in case the plan went wrong and he got thrown back again. Instead, after what felt like an eternity, he heard a small ding. He opened his eyes. The light on the box was green. Yes. He had done it. The box opened and folded into itself, transforming before his eyes into what looked suspiciously like a slot machine. There were three dials and a large lever. There was no mistaking it. Hector frowned. Okay, now what? He wrapped his fingers around the lever and pulled down. The dials spun before shuddering to a halt, revealing three numbers. Six, six, six. There was a loud groan. The white room slowly turned red and a hole opened in the floor beside him. Was this Hell? Hector stared at the machine in disbelief. Why would he be sent to Hell? He hadn't done anything wrong. He was a good boy. His mother always said so. He turned back toward the transporter. This was getting too weird. It would be best to go and come back with backup in case something happened. He paused. If it was a slot machine, surely it says nothing about his moral character, right? It's a slot machine. Random chance. He turned back to the slot machine and pulled the lever again. The dials spun again and again then stopped at six, six, six. He tried again. Six, six, six. Surely after a while, law of averages dictates he should get to Heaven eventually. He pulled the lever again. And again. And again. After a while, a chair appeared behind him and he sat down without thinking. He pulled the lever again. Maybe this time. He pulled it again. In the room beside him, another man was pulling a lever on another slot machine. And beside him another. And another. And beside him a woman. Then several more. And sitting above them all, peering at them with glee, was the Devil himself.

MARIE BERNHARD

Katie

Suffering from depression wasn't easy, but seeing a friend suffer from it was even worse. As long as I've known Katie I only had one goal: Get her the help she needed. But every time I would mention this to her, she refused to talk about it and changed the topic. Instead, I felt like she was distancing herself from me, right when she needed me the most, and I could not let that happen.

I was lying on Katie's bed staring at my history textbook. Normally, history was my strong subject, but today I just couldn't concentrate. The only thing I could think of was how I should approach the topic of therapy again. Lately, I felt like Katie was slipping away more than usual. She was eating less and always looked tired as if she hadn't slept for days. She had been struggling with depression and anxiety for as long as I've known her, but the past month was particularly hard on her. Not only could I see her struggling more, but I could also feel it.

'Hey, Em. What do you think about this dress? My mum wore it to her graduation, and I thought maybe I could too.'

Katie was standing in the doorway, wearing a long, red dress. It fit perfectly and I could see the similarities between her and her mum straight away. They had the same green eyes and brown curls, only Katie's were longer than her mum's curls were in the pictures I had seen. She looked beautiful. Still, one thing I couldn't help but notice were the long sleeves the dress had. Katie always wore long sleeves because she didn't want people to see her arms. Although, if you asked her, she would always say she was just cold.

'It's pretty, but are you sure your Dad will let you wear it?'

I knew Katie's Dad well. He was nice and caring, and loved Katie more than anything in the world. Still, sometimes I felt like he worried too much about her. I knew it was only because he wanted her to be safe, but sometimes it seemed like an obsession to me.

'I don't see why he wouldn't. He probably doesn't even remember this dress,' she said, trying to convince me. We both knew it wasn't true. Her dad remembered the dress very well and he remembered the time her mum wore it.

'All I'm saying is that you should talk to him first.'

Katie sighed. She knew I was right.

'Have you thought about what Miss White said? With the exam season starting soon and all the stress we will have, maybe it—' I didn't get to finish my sentence.

'If you're only here to lecture me about this again, you might as well go home. I don't need this.'

'You know I'm worried about you. We all are. Please at least think about it.'




'Fine. I will. If it makes you happy.'

'Promise?'

'Promise. Now please, can we talk about something else?'

And with that, the conversation was over. I knew she would not think about it, but I also knew that bringing it up again would make her want to think about it even less. So, I had to be okay with her silly promise, at least for now. So, what choice did I have other than to let it slide once more and hope that next time I would be able to convince her?

Katie knew there was something wrong with her. She always had known. But she didn't want anyone else to know that she didn't know how to handle things. Everyone told her it was okay to show weakness sometimes, but crying in front of others was



just not a thing Katie did. Well, except in front of me, of course. I sometimes felt like that was my only purpose in Katie's life, although I knew that wasn't true. We didn't become friends just so I could be her personal therapist, but because we had the same interests. We both took the same classes in school, had the same group of friends, and liked the same music. Of course, there were things we were different in – for example, Katie was pretty, way more than I would ever be, and the fact that she didn't think this herself made her even more beautiful. The main reason for our friendship working the way it did was that we always were honest with each other. We knew each other better than we knew ourselves. There was a bond between us, that only we understood. We always knew what the other person thought and what to do to make them feel better. I couldn't even imagine what life without Katie would be like. Not like I would have to. Katie would always be there, no matter what.

*

When Katie was a little girl, she loved going to the lake with her parents and Baxter, the family dog. It was her favourite thing to do. While her parents were holding hands and exchanging kisses whenever they thought Katie wasn't looking, she played fetch with Baxter. She would throw the stick into the lake as far as she could. Katie loved Baxter. He was her best friend. And when he was gone, he took all her happiness with him, and with that, her ability to show any emotion other than pain. As much as I tried to fill the hole that Baxter left, I knew I couldn't. It wasn't that she didn't love me. I knew she did. But I think she was always scared of losing me as well.

It wasn't true that she had nothing, but it was how she felt. It also wasn't true that I would ever leave her. What was true, however, was that Katie would never believe that. Why would I be different than anyone else? After all her mum loved her, but that still didn't stop her from taking her own life. I wasn't sure if Katie knew that her mum wanted to stay, wanted to be there for her little girl that she loved so much. Sometimes I felt like Katie thought it was easier to think that her mother left her on purpose, rather than accept the truth. Because accepting the truth would also mean that Katie had to understand the battle her mum was fighting, and this was something Katie couldn't do. She was in the middle of fighting her own battle. And that's why she needed help.

*

If I had told Katie what we were doing today, she wouldn't have come. So instead, I told her that I was gonna take her out for sushi, her favourite.

'Where are we going?' she asked, just as I pressed the button to stop the bus.

'I just need to get something quickly.'

She gave me a suspicious look but still followed me out of the bus. Sometimes I felt like Katie knew what I was planning before I even did. So maybe the fact that she didn't stop me today meant she was finally ready to get help. Or maybe she just played along, because she knew it would keep me quiet. Either way, I was glad she still followed, when I opened the door to the doctor's office.

'I know what you are planning, Em. I know you. And you should know that I am fine.'

‘You promised you would think about it. Katie, it’s been two weeks.’

‘What do you want me to do? Talk to someone and then what? Tell them about my ‘feelings’? About my mum? That won’t change anything and you know it. My mum will still be gone and she won’t come back.’

That was one of her favourite arguments. *She’s gone and won’t come back.* It felt as if Katie didn’t understand that it wasn’t about bringing her mum back. It was about bringing Katie back.

Katie and I became friends about a month after her mum’s death. I saw her sitting alone in the cafeteria, looking like something was bothering her. Of course, I didn’t know what it was back then, but I wanted to help. It took her some time to tell me about her mother. She never told anyone before. When someone asked, she would always say that her mum was on a work trip somewhere. Deep down I knew she was lying, so when she told me what had happened, it wasn’t much of a surprise to me. It was as if I had known all along and something told me that she needed me.

*

I still don’t know how I convinced Katie to talk to a therapist that day. After all these years of her suffering in silence, it was as if I had finally come through to her. She refused to tell me anything about her appointment, but I took that as a good sign. That, and the fact that the week after Katie went again. She asked me to come, although she still wouldn’t talk to me about it.

Somehow it felt like we were getting a routine. It was still a month until school would finish, and exam season would start. I was glad that Katie was getting help every Tuesday now. I just

wished she would talk to me about it. I knew she had a long way ahead of her, but she finally took the first step.

I had to be there for Katie to make sure she was okay. So, when Katie's life changed, mine did too.

Katie and I still spent every day together – we always did – but something made me feel like she was talking less to me than she used to. During school lunch, she stopped sitting next to me. We were still sitting at the same table, just instead of sitting next to me, she now sat next to Sarah. I knew Sarah was never gonna replace me as her best friend. That job was for me only. But she did join us when we went out more often now. And every time she did, I felt like they were just talking to each other, and not to me. This story isn't about me, and I hate to make it seem like it is. It's about Katie. Everything was always about Katie. But I can't ignore the fact that I was part of Katie's life, even though it didn't really feel like it anymore.

Katie always had pictures of us on her desk, but now that I was taking a closer look at them, I felt like something was wrong with them. Next to Katie I always looked a little like a ghost. My hair was blond, almost white and my skin was so light that Katie sometimes joked about me having lost all my blood. Just that in the pictures I looked more like a shadow than like my true self. How had I never noticed that?

It must have been a trick of the light because as soon as Katie came into the room, blocking the sunlight, the pictures looked like they always did. Nothing unusual. There were Katie and I sitting in the garden, smiling at each other.

I still didn't know why I looked like a shadow in the pictures the other day, but it didn't matter. Katie was making progress at therapy and everyone noticed.

She always had other friends than me, but she hated talking to them. Not that she didn't like her friends, of course she did, but she was scared that if she would talk to them too much, they'd figure that she wasn't okay. Somehow this wasn't an issue anymore. The Katie I knew and loved started turning into someone else – as if she was starting to actually be happy. The happier Katie became, the less she needed me, and I didn't know how to feel about that; we've been through so much together.

*

'I want to go and visit mum,' Katie announced that evening at the dinner table.

Her dad had made homemade pizza. Normally this was my favourite, but today I wasn't hungry. So instead of three plates, there were only two on the table.

'Oh. Sure, honey? Do you want me to come with you?'

'No, I'll be fine. Em will come with me, right?' She glanced over at me and I quickly nodded.

Her father gave her an uneasy look. I wasn't quite sure what it was about. He knew me, so he should know that Katie was just fine with me.

*

So, when Sunday came, Katie and I made our way to the graveyard. It was her first time there, since the funeral. I took it as a good sign, that she was finally ready to go, but I was still a little worried. What if she wasn't ready yet?

We stopped at the shop to get some flowers. Lilies, her mum's

favourites. Funny, they were my favourite too. Katie loved lilies as well, but her favourite were roses.

The graveyard was empty when we arrived. I was surprised to find out how perfectly well Katie knew the way to her mother's grave, but then I guess this was something she wouldn't forget. Something that haunted her in her dreams.

Katie didn't talk the whole way to her mother's grave, but she wasn't crying as I thought she would. It wasn't like anyone could see her. Maybe she thought her mother would be disappointed in her if she cried, but her mother wouldn't be. No one would be.

When we reached the grave, Katie put the flowers down next to the flowers that were left by the headstone. Her dad must have been here a few days ago.

'Hey, mum. I'm sorry I didn't visit you since the funeral. I guess I just wasn't ready to let go.' Tears started running down her face now and I silently took her hand. She squeezed it. 'But I am now. I miss you so much, mum. So much, that I didn't know how to deal with you not being there. I will always love you and I wish you could be here to see the progress I've made. Dad misses you too, but you know that. I always thought you left because you didn't love us enough. I know better now. You left because you loved us too much. And that's why I will be okay.'

She let go of my hand and moved her fingers over her mother's name, engraved on the beautiful, white marble.

Emma Louise Wakefield

I had known her mother's name, of course, but seeing it right in front of me made me shiver. How had I not realised, after all these years?

I noticed that Katie was ready to leave, but for some reason, I wasn't. Because I was where I belonged. Katie was finally ready to move on.

Maybe the reason why we went to the graveyard wasn't so Katie could let go of her mother. Maybe it was so she could let go of the part of her mother that haunted her. She wanted her mother so desperately to be there for her, to be her best friend, that she made it happen.

That's when I realised that I couldn't remember my life before Katie, because there wasn't a life before her. And there wouldn't be a life after Katie either.

I was sad about leaving her, but it was the right thing to do because leaving her meant I had achieved my goal. Katie wasn't happy, but she was starting to understand that she could be. Maybe I managed to fill the hole that her mum and Baxter left, just that now it was as if this hole was filled with something else, something better.

Katie was already at the graveyard's gate when she turned around and looked at me, a smile on her face. It was the last thing I saw before I disappeared.

Untitled

It was a sunny afternoon in mid-April when I picked up the old telephone stationed on my nan's coffee table. I knew his number out of my head because it was the only number I ever called. Even though Mum told me to never call it again, I had to do it anyway. So I typed in the 9 digits and listened to the phone ringing. While waiting for him to pick up, I counted how many times it rang. One, Two, Three. Why wasn't he picking up? Six, Seven. Voicemail.

Maybe Mum was right all along. Maybe he didn't care, never had. After all, aren't mums always right? But I couldn't let her be right. Not with this important thing in my life. So I tried again. One, Two, Three, Four, Fi—

'Hello?' A female voice answered the phone.

I dropped the phone back on the station immediately, without saying a word. Who was that? Maybe I just typed in the number wrong. Yes, that's what it was. I was so anxious, that I just typed in the number wrong and the woman on the other side now thought it was just a prank call.

I let out a nervous laugh while picking up the phone again. Before connecting the call I checked the number five times, just to make sure it was the correct one. This time I only got to two, until an annoyed female voice answered.

'Listen, we don't have time for jokes. Please stop calling.'

I felt the tears collecting in my eyes. This was the same voice. And not only that, it was a voice I had never heard before. I felt something inside me break. Was it my heart? I couldn't tell. But it hurt. Never, in my whole life had I felt this much pain. Not when

the one person who could make all the pain disappear was just one phone call away.

'Hello?' The annoying voice said from the other end.

I swallowed down my tears. 'Is this... I'd like to speak to my father please.'

'Darling, what was your name again? Never mind, your father is busy at the moment and can't take calls. Is there anything you'd like me to tell him?'

I shook my head, not realising she couldn't see me. 'It's fine,' I whispered.

'Alright then. Have a lovely day. Bye.'

And then the line went dead.

'My name is Abby,' was all I was able to bring out.

I didn't realise I had started crying or that I curled up into a ball on the floor, the phone still in my hand, until my mum found me. She only needed to take one look at the phone to realise what had happened. I prepared myself for her to get angry, to scream at me, but it never came. Instead she hung up the phone and pulled me into a tight hug.

'I'm so sorry.' She whispered into my ear, but I didn't need her to say it. It wasn't her fault and she had nothing to be sorry for. All that mattered was that she was here and that she would never let go of me. All of the sudden I was reminded of the time when I was a little girl, afraid of the dark, and I realised it was mum all along, who stayed up all night to scare off all the monsters under my bed. Even though I felt incredibly sad inside at that moment, I knew I would be okay, because my mum wouldn't let any of the monsters she had scared off all those years ago back into my life.

GEMMA BORDA

The Most Important Lesson

Crunch. Crunch. The sound of the plush white snow beneath Lily's boots was music to her ears, memories of past winters flooding into her mind. She remembered the big snowman the other year. It was tragic – she was hungry and ate his nose.

Now she didn't feel like making one just yet, instead, she flopped down on her back, her long skirts fluttering as she did so – and moved her arms as if pretending she were a jelly fish and the snow her icy waters. Eventually getting up, she admired the snow angel, nowhere near as big as her sister's usually is. One day hers would be bigger.

—Lily, the wind called to her.

—Lily, it stroked her face with an icy hand.

—Who is it? She called back, bewildered yet entranced by whoever – or whatever called to her.

No answer, yet she found her feet moving almost separately from her own will, taking her deeper into the woods. Dark ever-greens loomed above. They would have blocked out the sun had the grey clouds not already done so. She glanced back and found her tracks prominent enough to follow, so she headed further and further until the trees parted before her like a line of soldiers before a Queen. Spinning around to observe the clearing, her heart leapt up her throat as a tall figure on the other side stood as still as an ancient statue.

Long white hair cascaded down his back. Against the pure white of his surroundings, he hardly stood out apart from his light grey collar, belt, and boots next to his snow-white clothing. He would have looked like an angel with his fair skin and breathtakingly

handsome face, were it not for his piercing red eyes, pinning Lily to the spot she stood.

He brought a hand up and beckoned her closer, but it seemed as if her legs had been covered in ice boots – heavy and frozen to the ground. Seeing her reluctance, he showed her his palms, as if a sign of peace, and slowly – painfully slowly – crossed over the large clearing.

Lily glanced behind to find her tracks, but they had vanished as if through the magic she thought was almost tangibly crackling in the air. Closer, and closer he came. Slowly and cautiously as if to not scare her off, coming to a stop much closer than she was comfortable with.

His eyes were piercing, the coloured part was a brilliant red with intricate shades swirling within, as if they were eternal secrets alive inside him. His pupils widened as more light hit him, accenting the straight line of his stubbled jaw. His eyebrows were almost perfectly symmetrical, and his lips were not too thick or thin, instead they were light and minutely parted.

He reached out his hand, palm open, but stopped just short of Lily.

—Who are you? She began. No reply, he merely watched expectantly, waiting, and watching her eyes.

Strangely, she felt no panic, no urge to run – although a voice inside her kept yelling at her to. She felt a strange calm, even a curiosity to see where he would lead her. Naïve? Most definitely – but life was short. If this were how it were to end, then at least it would be different. She had been happy enough, a little lacking in the luxuries children of wealthier people had – even if she had merely attended the village schoolhouse. She had learned to read and write – none of her family could. She had already achieved enough if this was the end.

Although, she knew her mother would die of heartbreak. She could not do that to her! Yet, she could not outrun him – his powerful legs would carry him right after her, and his big strong arms would lift her off the ground. She might as well see what would happen – if he were not human, she would never find out where he wanted to take her if she tried to run. His eyes showed options, her choice.


Nothing had ever been her choice; she was too young for major choices. But this was hers to make. So, her hand reached out, small compared to his long, strong fingers and palm larger than two of her little ones.

She thought he would be cold as ice; he looked like it, yet he was warm, like a fire. He led her along, only a step ahead as she followed alongside him, forgetting herself and gazing around at the beauty of the snow-covered forest. A wave of safety washed over her, she could not explain how she knew – but she did, that she would be home in time for dinner tonight.

They walked in silence, with the only sound from the forest being the odd larger animals that did not make burrows and hide away for the winter. It was part of the reason she would never come so far on her own. Her mother had made that clear.

But now she was not alone. She was with *him*. Whoever *he* was. She lost track of time, all she knew was the whiteness around her and the grey sky – so evenly covered in clouds that it looked as if the sky were clear but had simply changed colour.


She did not know when it was, but eventually they emerged into a much smaller clearing than the one they had met in. That is when she saw the little old wooden cottage, her eyes taking in the moss growing on the roof, the narrow stone chimney crumbling, the front door chipped and slightly ajar. They came to a stop by



the steps to the door, the decking creaked as they advanced onto the platform.


The man stopped and released her hand, glancing from her to the door. She took a deep breath and pushed the door open with a creak, the man turned and leaned against a post, so he looked out at the forest. He would wait; she understood.

Stepping inside with more creaks and groans from the house, she braced herself for whatever he had brought her for. Inside the house was empty, stairs lead up – probably to the bedrooms. She walked to the middle of the small cottage, taking in the old fireplace with old ashes remaining. An old grate stood in the corner, rusty, well cooked on above the fire. There stood a rickety old table and four chairs, one broken and leaning against the wall. The old flowery wallpaper discoloured where a dresser would have been.




Finally, she walked over to the window, its panes covered in frost, intricate patterns giving a shattered effect. A thin layer of dust was forming on the crystals and more prominently on the windowsill. She wondered how old it might be, the things this cottage had seen and meant to someone – if anyone.

She felt warmth behind her, suddenly twirling to look back at the fireplace, a fresh new fire was blazing as if someone had taken time to get it going. Then a giggle sounded and just as she turned, a little girl and boy ran straight at her. Her feet frozen in place, she braced for the impact, but it never came. They ran right through her. White matter – as if fog – seemed to float around them as they chased each other around the cottage. A voice called out, a woman. In came a woman in her thirties with a man – seeming to be her husband, who pulled a large tree with him. Even the tree had the white fog.



They disappeared, but reappeared around a tree with only a few decorations, the number of which you could count on two hands. Four small oranges sat on a plate with four-minute squares of what looked to be solid chocolate! Lily's mouth watered at the sight, feeling her stomach rumble as she watched. Candlelight filled the room, and soon voices began singing 'Silent Night', mother and father holding son and daughter, the four in a semi-circle watching the four candles flickering on the tree.

Just as Lily settled down, enjoying the company of the visions, they disappeared, along with the angelic singing and the smell of food. She blinked, but no sooner did they disappear than they reappeared again – the mother cooking, the girl sweeping, the boy carving something by the firelight and the father walking in from a day of work with money in hand. Many such scenes followed, the parents almost monotonous, yet the children growing.



As she expected to see them grow up, the vision turned almost dark, the ghostly lights dimming. A loud crash echoed from the door which was bolted shut. The mother glanced at the front window in panic and ran to the two children ushering them to a heavy wooden wardrobe, intricately carved like some heirloom passed down through the centuries. They obeyed.

The next crash sent the door splintering open, a grey man ran at her. Lily screamed as he passed through her and swung an axe above his head, landing on the mother's head, who crumbled to the ground, crimson oozing onto the floorboards. A whiff of alcohol hit Lily's nostrils as the older man spat at the ground, looked around him, and left. There was silence for a few minutes until she walked to the wardrobe and swung the heavy door open, the two children shaking from silent sobs. The older girl comforting the younger boy through her own tears.

As she went to reach for them, they vanished along with the wardrobe, yet one thing did not; the stain on the ground behind which she now knew the history. There was nothing for a while, but silence. As the door creaked open, she expected more, but the white man entered, as if knowing what she had seen and how it made her feel. He walked right up to her silently, then waited. She was so aware of the size difference; he was more than double her height as he towered before her. She couldn't even hear him breathing in the icy silence. Did he even breathe? Her breath clouded before her, but there was not a sliver of that in front of him.

—Who are you? Why did you bring me here? She asked the stranger. No reply. He lifted a finger and pointed behind her, she swirled around to find a sheet of old paper flit to the floor, as if dropping from someone's hands only a second ago. She picked it up and began reading:

'A WINDOW

Beams glint through the cold glass,
Light refracting past frost and dust.
The frost unrelenting and
Biting at its frame,
Dust settled on the panes, a
Thin sheet turning it opaque,
Oh, the story the dust could
Tell if only it could shape itself
Into images. Stories of young
And bold, stories of old
And tales of woe,
If only panes would creak
Intelligible words, they'd

Sing for the souls who'd passed
And those who remain.
If only the corners of the room
Saw as much as the window.
Tales of love and romance,
cases of murder and thievery,
News of babes and fortune
And reports of loss and misery.
If the glass could shatter in the
Number of stories it had to tell,
There wouldn't be room for its
Pieces to go.'

Lily looked up at the man who simply waited. She turned to the window and touched the old icy, dusty, glass, feeling the moisture against her warm fingers. Outside, she saw tracks appear in the snow, then the door opened behind her. In came the siblings, older now, dressed in black. They looked out of the window at the falling snow, and Lily did not know how – but she knew they had buried both of their parents.

She saw some days of the two working together, but eventually the brother left, and a new man came. Then there were children, and their Christmas scenes were now with the family of the sister. Then eventually the furniture disappeared, and the door did not open again.

She sighed. That had been strange.

—Do you know who they were? The white man spoke for the first time. His voice was a deep, rumbling one, smooth and strangely amazing. The voice of an angel.

Lily was taken aback but eventually managed to reply.

—No.

—The girl: that was your grandmother. The eldest boy, her son: your father. The lady who died: your great grandmother.

Lily's jaw hung open wide. He boldly grasped her hand, scooped her up and walked out the door.

—No! Wait, I have so many... She wanted to say 'questions', but they were no longer on the ground, and the trees were ant size, and she saw her house through the large, intricate white feathers. Within seconds, they were on the deck of her little house.

—Now find the answer to your question, Lily. The man said as he lowered her by the door. Then he slipped through her fingers like mist.

In went Lily to find her mother by the fire, preparing meat her father had brought home.

—Father, I saw you. She said. He sat up in his spot by the fire, looking puzzled.


—This man, he showed me your mother and uncle... and your grandmother on the kitchen floor... Tears welled up in her eyes and her voice cracked.

He hurried to her and scooped her up.



—Lily, whatever you saw, it was true. Although I do not want you going to that house. We left the past to be the past, but I would like to introduce you to some people this Christmas, he said.

Then an old man – the younger brother many years on now, walked out of the kitchen, followed by two ladies younger than her father.

—This is my uncle, and my two sisters, your aunts. The only surviving close family. You saw them with whatever took you to our house.



Now she knew. Now she would always remember – for the rest of her life, that she will never know the life and history someone brings. You see someone for a snippet of their lives, yet behind them is history, stories that they may take to their graves. This story though, she would share so it lived forever; the lesson she had learnt to be taught forever. The most important lesson.



SAMANTHA BURTON

Serpents in the Shadows

Rydal's bronze hair danced in the wind as he stood on top of a tall building surveilling a small coffee shop, his golden eyes analysing everyone who walked in and out. Fae warriors have been crossing the borders between the mortal and immortal worlds for millennia, sometimes to keep up to date on their advancement, but more importantly, to ensure that the fae realm remains a secret. Throughout time there have been whispers and rumours about the fae realm, but human ignorance quickly called people who claimed they've danced with the fairies mad and moved on with their lives. The idea of the fae to a normal human has never left the storybooks of folklore.

Word had reached Rydal's Queen from some of her scouts that a group of mortals had stepped up their efforts to try and find the immortal realm. He'd laughed when his Queen had given him this assignment but as a loyal subject he'd obeyed anyway. In his four hundred years no human has ever come close to discovering the fae realm.

Rydal looked out along the road and crouched down, watching the suspected group of mortals leave the coffee shop. He pulled out a folded piece of paper from his leather jacket pocket and looked at the names of those trying to expose his kind. He stared at the words for a while, then sighed and shoved the paper back into his pocket. He'd tracked many groups like this across London and for the most part they were all the same: obsessed with the romance of the fae, but on the whole harmless. This group however were different. They seemed to know something more. He ran his tanned fingers through his hair, and stalked towards the exit, but halted when something dark moved in his peripheral.

Rydal slowly slid his dagger from its sheath and scanned his surroundings, trying to keep his movements to a minimum. Suddenly, a strong force struck him from behind, knocking him to the floor. He spun onto his back to face his opponent and stared straight into a familiar smiling face.

A dark skinned female fae looked down at him. Big brown eyes shined with determination through long black hair, covering her face. A gold flowery mark swirled around her left eye, shining in the sunlight, the mark of the assassin mirrored Rydal's own.

Rydal grunted underneath the weight of her body. 'Really Faylen?' He growled in annoyance.

'So, is that the group of humans trying to find us?' She nodded her head to where Rydal was once standing.

He rolled his eyes. 'Well maybe if you let me get up, we can find out.'

'Well maybe if you were quick enough, I wouldn't have been able to pin you.' Faylen stood and offered him her hand.

Rydal grabbed her hand and dusted off his clothes. He pulled out the piece of paper again and gave it to her to inspect. 'According to the scouts, this is the group of mortals who have been getting close to finding the fae lands.'

Faylen laughed as she walked towards the edge of the building. 'What? Do they keep a pile of salt outside their front door expecting us to count every grain and then capture us to interrogate where the immortal realm is? Or does this group prefer the bread and milk method?'

Rydal laughed. 'You'd think.' He took in a deep breath. 'I've been watching them for a few weeks now and they meet here every Wednesday at noon.' He started to walk towards the exit again and said over his shoulder, 'Coming?'

Faylen skipped over to Rydal and grinned. 'Don't you dare think you're going to have all of the fun without me.'

They both walked through the exit and headed down the stairs. Rydal grabbed Faylen's arm, preventing her from walking onto the street.

Faylen whirled around on him. 'What?' She snapped.

He nodded his head at her eye. 'Forgetting something? We are meant to blend in with the mortals, I'm pretty sure assassin marks and pointy ears would stand out.'

She rolled her eyes and ran her hand over her face, glamouring her mark and ears and dulling her features.

Fae's natural beauty was one thing the stories had correct. In the past many humans had fallen prey to their alluring features. But the days of hunting mortals were banned many millennia ago. They would once lure humans to the fae world and use them as prey for the Wild Hunt. When Rydal's Queen came into power three thousand years ago, she found the tradition to be barbaric and forbid any fae to hunt a mortal.

As Rydal glamoured himself, they pushed open the heavy door and walked towards the small coffee shop, cars honking at them as they darted across the road.

The bell rang softly as Faylen swung open the door, and the scent of coffee beans hit their noses instantly. The front half of the store was an old-fashioned style café, small tables dotted around with a long mahogany counter where the baristas busied themselves. On one side of the shop, the entire length was covered with a wooden shelves containing books for people to read while they drink their coffees.

'You can sit wherever you want.' A young female voice called out from behind the counter. Her back was turned, her light wavy brown hair bouncing with her every step.

Rydal nodded to the far corner to indicate where Faylen should sit as he walked up to the counter to order. The barista turned to face him and gave him a sweet smile. She walked up to Rydal and when her scent hit him, it sent him staggering back, light-headed. The girl, no more than eighteen years old, smelt of roses and strawberries, but much more intense. Rydal couldn't explain what he felt.

She said something to him, but his brain was too overwhelmed with the sweet smell that he didn't hear what she said. Never in his whole time dealing with mortals had he met someone with a scent as intense before, not even fae had smelt like this before.

'Are you okay?' Her light grey eyes were filled with concern.

He shook his head slowly, trying to clear his mind. 'Yeah – yeah, sorry. Can I – can I just get two black coffees please?'

'Sure.' She walked over to the machine and she started preparing their coffees as she looked over her shoulder at him. 'Where have you been today?'

Rydal looked at her, puzzled. 'Excuse me?'

She quickly looked down and shook her head. 'Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you went to a carnival or parade.'

He looked at her, still confused. 'What makes you think that?'

'I just thought you might have gotten the gold face paint for a parade or something.' She pointed to her left eye.

Rydal stared at her blankly, unable to fathom how she was able to see through the glamour he'd cast. He quickly regained his composure and gave her a kind smile. 'Oh, yes, sorry. My friend over there, it was her little sister's birthday so that's why our faces are painted.'

She nodded. 'Aw, well I hope you had a nice time. You can join your friend and I'll bring your coffees over once they're ready.'

‘Thank you.’ Rydal answered while digging in his pocket for money. He placed the coins onto the counter and said, ‘You can keep the change,’ and walked back over to their table. His back was tense as he sat opposite Faylen, his eyes distant.

‘What the hell is wrong with you?’ Faylen asked as she leaned back in her chair.

Rydal leaned towards her. ‘She can see through our glamour.’ He whispered.

Faylen froze and her eyes went wide. ‘What?’

He shook his head, trying to wrap his mind around all of the thoughts swirling in his head. ‘And her scent. . . Faylen it’s like no other mortals, it’s more intense.’

‘Like a fae?’

‘Stronger.’ He leaned back in his chair and noticed the waitress coming over with their coffees. ‘She’s coming.’ He said quietly. The scent grew stronger as she approached, clouding Rydal’s mind again, almost intoxicating him.

The waitress carefully walked over and placed the cups on the table. ‘Here are your coffees, if you need help with anything else, I’ll be your waitress today, Melody.’

Faylen looked over at Rydal then back at Melody. ‘Actually yes, there is something you can help with. We are supposed to meet a group of friends here, but we appeared to have missed them.’

Melody groaned quietly. ‘The group that was in here a short while ago? I don’t mean this in a horrible way, but your friends are strange. They sit in the corner whispering and stop talking whenever anyone comes near them.’ She smiled to the ground, ‘Did you not see them at your party earlier? One of them has his face painted similar to yours.’ The bell from the shop door chimed,

summoning Melody back to the front. 'If you need anything I'll be at the counter.'

Faylen and Rydal both sat there in silence as they listened to Melody's footsteps walk away.

'What the hell does she mean face paint like ours?' Faylen hissed quietly.

Rydal pondered, 'Every member of the royal court has their own mark. But only assassins have their mark on their face.'

'Yeah because of that stupid curse.' Faylen grumbled.

'That's beside the point.' Rydal retorted. 'Melody said that his mark looks like ours, all assassin's marks are exactly the same. Who else has their mark on their face?'

'No other court has their marks on their face, the closest is the guards with theirs on their neck.'

'I know she's mortal Faylen, but I think she knows the difference between a neck and face.' Rydal raised his eyebrows making her roll her eyes. 'Unless...'

'Unless?'

'Unless that mortal is trying to pose as a fae.' He quickly pushed his chair back and crossed the shop to Melody.

'I'm sorry to bother you, but do you mind drawing the face paint you saw on that man's face?'

Melody's eyebrows furrowed with confusion, but she smiled and drew a quick sketch anyway. 'It's not perfect, but this is more or less what it looked like.'

Rydal took the small piece of paper and studied it. 'Thank you.' He smiled and returned to Faylen.

He held out a piece of paper to her and she snatched it from his hand, studying every single pencil stroke. She was silent for a long time before finally pushing the paper away from her and giving an

annoyed sigh. 'Look,' Faylen slumped back in her chair. 'We're not going to get any answers now, we need to wait until next week and in the meantime report back.'

Rydal knew better then to push her further, especially when she's annoyed because she can't figure out the answer. He looked over her shoulder towards the counter. 'What about Melody?'

Faylen looked in her spoon to see Melody's reflection. 'I don't know, I've never known a human to see through a glamour before.'

'Mm.' Rydal murmured, deep in thought. 'Maybe the scholars know something.'

Faylen pushed back her chair and bounced to her feet. 'Only one way to find out.' The she strode out the store.

Rydal sighed and followed, before leaving the store he looked over his shoulder and smiled at Melody. 'Thank you, have a nice day.'

Melody looked up at him slightly, distracted by the customer in front of her. 'Thank you, you too!' She called out.

Rydal stepped outside of the store and was met by a smirking Faylen. 'What was that?' She asked, twirling her hair.

He rolled his eyes and stalked past her. 'Shut up! Let's just get back and give our report.'

*

The mortal realm is nothing compared to the fae realm, especially the castle. The hallway they were walking down had clear diamond walls with golden accents, created rainbows on the marble tiled floor. Lower faes were roaming around the halls trying to keep the castle pristine as possible, staying out of the way of the higher faes, who were discussing plans for some future ball.

Rydal and Faylen marched through the centre of the hallway, both higher and lower fae giving way to them. They'd changed out of their mortal clothing and were now wearing their black fighting leathers, a sharp contrast to the bright colours and light in the castle. They headed towards the throne room to meet with their Queen and the army commander to report what they have earned.

As they approached the door, they could hear the commander's voice filling the room. 'Your Majesty, I don't understand why we are bothering with rumours from the mortal world. They have always had their own ideas about our kind, nothing more than a story to get children to fall asleep.'

The two assassins walked into the room quietly and Rydal saw the aggravated look on his Queen's face. 'Because Tathaln, this is much more than just rumours. Maybe if you stay silent and listen to them speak, you'll realise what is truly going on.' She gestured towards them and Faylen tried to hide her snicker.

The throne room was the largest room in the castle. It could host balls or other court events all in the same area. The high ceilings made the room feel more open and the diamond walls curve towards the top to create a dome. Gold pillars led from the doorway to the throne where the Queen sat.

The Queen sat tall with her legs crossed. Her long white hair was half braided up while the rest fell around her face to emphasise her features. Her skin was light blue with a translucent look in the light. Her dark blue eyes focused on the two assassins as they walked towards her, both bowed their heads as they approached.

'Report. What did you learn from your travels to the mortal realm?' The Queen asked.

Rydal stepped forward. 'We suspect that the leader of the group is either a fae or posing as one.'

‘Posing?’ Tathaln said in confusion, his bushy black eyebrows furrowing.

‘There was a girl who works in the café who saw the leader and drew the marking he had on his face.’ Rydal walked towards the Queen to present her with the drawing.

Tathaln laughed. ‘We are trusting a mortal?’

Rydal gave him a death glare and it took every bit of him not to punch him in his slimy green face. ‘She can see through fae glamours.’ His voice was tense.

The Queen picked up on Rydal’s aggravation but put her curiosity to one side for the moment as she inspected the drawing. Her blue eyes went wide, but she quickly regained her composure. ‘When are you next going to the mortal realm to investigate this?’

‘The group is due to return in seven days.’ Faylen answered.

‘Good, in the meantime find out why the girl can see through glamours and I’ll accompany you on your next visit.’

‘What?!’ Tathaln exclaimed. ‘How could you possibly think that—’

‘Remember who you are talking to commander!’ The Queen replied in a stern tone, making the commander fall silent.

Faylen hid her smirk by bowing her head as Rydal retrieved the drawing from the Queen. They both left the throne room and headed towards the library where the scholars stayed. He handed her the drawing as they walked through the big arched doors into the library.

Every single wall was covered with books, three different levels around the edges. In the centre of the open space was a large crystal and ruby chandelier that reflected rainbows around the room. Rows of desks filled the middle of the room and a dozen of scholars flittered from each one. Leather bound books were piled high on the

desks with scrolls scattered across them. Each one of the scholars wore a different colour robe indicating their speciality.

Rydal and Faylen headed towards an ancient fae who was wearing a purple robe, indicating his specialty of the history and origin of fae. He was the oldest within the kingdom, although no one truly knew how old he was. His head was buried in a book, his long silver hair draping over the pages.

Faylen skipped over to where he was working with a massive grin on her face. 'Drannor, my favourite scholar, how are you doing?' She perched herself on the table.

'Ah, Faylen and Rydal, my two favourite assassins, what can I do for you?' He sung.

Rydal sat beside him and asked, 'How can a mortal see through a glamour?'

Drannor's eyes went wide. 'Who?'

'Just some female human we met today.' Faylen answered.

'She's not just a normal female,' Rydal snarled.

Drannor's eyes switched to curiosity while he studied Rydal's composure. 'Tell me more about her.'

Rydal shook his head and looked at Drannor. 'She's different from any other mortal I've met. The glamour didn't even work slightly on her, and her scent.' He sighed and trailed off. 'Her scent is more powerful than anything I've ever experienced, practically intoxicating.'

'Actually, that's not true.' Faylen responded. 'She didn't smell any different to me, I wasn't affected at all.'

'Oh my,' Drannor said more to himself than anyone else.

'What?' Faylen and Rydal asked at the same time.

Drannor got up to his feet quickly and started to walk towards the back of the library. 'There are only two ways for a mortal to see

through a glamour. The first a lot more common than the second.' He rounded a corner and started to scan all of the books along the shelf. 'A mortal can be a half-fae, so the magic we use to hide ourselves from them does not work against them. However, they normally have a tell, either pointy ears, scales, animalistic eyes or even a tail.'

'But she seemed like any other human.' Faylen added and Rydal gave her a warning look.

Drannor turned to face her and nodded. 'Indeed, from the information you have given me she seems normal.' He headed down another row of books and brushed his finger against the shelves. 'The second way is extremely rare. I can count on one hand the amount of times I have seen and heard of this, and never with a human.' He stopped in his tracks and pulled out a book and flicked through the pages. 'There was never an official name given to this because it was so rare. Scholars decided to nickname it *fatum amantes*.'

'What now?' Faylen's eyebrows rose.

Rydal took a step back. 'What does this mean?'

Drannor sighed. 'Let's find somewhere to sit down so you can process this.' Then he walked off again and headed deeper into the library. He eventually found a table in a dark corner and switched on the lamp.

Drannor sat opposite the assassins and spun the book around for them to read. He pointed to the top of the page. 'Here, *fatum amantes*, so rare that this page is the only one that describes it. However, it's only speculated whether this could happen between a fae and a human, but everything you're telling me makes sense.'

'Cut to the chase Drannor, what is it?' Faylen said impatiently.

He sighed. 'It loosely translates to destiny lovers. It's when two beings are bound together by either fate or destiny. The male tends

to be more protective over the female and her scent tends to be more intense compared to anything else. This helps lure the male in, and the female tends to have their whole focus on the male. You two will both be drawn to each other, wanting to see and be with each other. You'll do anything for each other, including dying.'

Rydal leaned back in his chair trying to process all of this information but was quickly interrupted by Faylen's roaring laugh. 'So, this is basically a more intense version of a crush?'

'Shut up,' Rydal growled.

'Okay, okay,' Drannor tried to calm down the situation. 'There's nothing you can do about it now, but Rydal.' Drannor gave him a warning look, 'Be careful. When you're around her you won't be able to control yourself properly. The more time you spend with her the more intense the feelings will grow. You'll do anything to help her, protect her.'

'I understand what this is, but I don't understand why. Why us?' Rydal asked.

'Honestly Rydal, I don't know.' He turned the book back around and studied the page. 'No one knows, like I said, it's rare so no one has been able to study it properly. But I do know that because you two are connected by destiny, she has the power to see through our magic.'

As Rydal slumped back in his chair and ran his fingers through his hair, Faylen leaned forward and dug the drawing out of her pocket to show Drannor. 'What do you make of this?'

Drannor took the piece of paper and stared at the drawing, just like the Queen, his eyes went wide and he quickly regained his composure. 'Has the Queen seen this?'

'Yes.'

'Good.' He hummed. 'I'll discuss this with her in more detail.'

‘Wait,’ Faylen asked impatiently. ‘What does it mean?’

Drannor stood up and shoved the drawing in his pocket. ‘Once I have discussed this with the Queen, I’ll come to you two.’ Then he walked away to the main part of the library.

Faylen kicked back her chair and grumbled. ‘You’d think that we’re not the ones investigating this with all of the secrecy.’ She folded her arms across her chest.

Rydal chuckled but was lost for words with all of this new information spinning around in his head.

Faylen nudged his elbow with her own. ‘Hey,’ she said softly, ‘what are you going to do about Melody?’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Stay away from her and try not to think about her until our assignment is over.’

‘Do you really think that staying away from her is the best option?’

‘Didn’t you hear him? It’ll only get more intense each time I see her, I can’t risk it.’ He sighed and leaned his head back.

Faylen was quiet for a while. ‘Do you love her?’ Her tone was curious.

Rydal’s eyes snapped open. ‘I don’t even know her Faylen. But... I want to see her again, get to know her.’

Faylen looked deep in thought and then gave him a sympathetic simile. ‘Maybe staying away from her is the best decision at the moment. But as soon as this assignment is over, I want to help you get to know her.’

*

A week passed, and both Rydal and Faylen were in mortal clothing waiting for their Queen to arrive. They paced in front of the

portal leading to the mortal realm going over strategies on how to isolate the member of the group with fae markings so they could interrogate him. They both agreed the best time to attempt to capture him was as the group left the coffee shop and went their own ways.

The Queen swept over to them with Drannor by her side. She was dressed in mortal clothing, which looked out of place against her regal beauty. The two of them spoke in hushed tones that Rydal was only able to catch the ending of their conversation.

‘You should really tell them my Queen.’ Drannor insisted.

‘In time my dear friend.’ The Queen replied. She turned to look at the two waiting assassins and smiled at them sweetly. ‘Are we ready?’

They both bowed to her and Faylen replied, ‘Yes my Queen.’

‘Be careful.’ Drannor warned their Queen. She nodded her head in gratitude.

The three of them walk through the golden portal to enter the mortal realm and were transported to a dark alleyway opposite the coffee shop.

Faylen walked out first with Rydal bringing up the rear, trying to protect their Queen as much as possible. Both of them remained alert, their eyes watching warily anyone who walked too closely to them, a hidden dagger in reach of their hands.

Faylen swung open the door to the café and escorted the Queen to the back corner. Rydal’s eyes automatically scanned the room searching for Melody, finding her behind the counter cleaning the machines. He walked up to the till and her scent hit him harder than he remembered, causing him to grip onto the side to stabilise himself.

Melody whirled around and her eyes met his straight away.

She froze for a second and then collected herself. She walked up to him with a sweet smile and set the till up. 'Are you going to ask for three black coffees or something more interesting.' She laughed.

Her laughter filled Rydal with such joy, and he smiled to the ground. 'I'm sorry that I'm boring.' He chuckled.

'So, what can I get you?'

'Just three cappuccinos please.'

Melody entered the order into the till and turned to make the coffees. 'You can go and sit down, and I'll bring them over once they're ready.'

'Thank you.' He replied and left the money on the counter.

He walked over to where his Queen and Faylen were sitting. Due to Melody being able to see through the most powerful glamours, the Queen wore a jacket with an oversized hood and gloves to keep all of her skin covered.

'So that's her?' She asked with a small smile.

Rydal stared at her blankly not knowing what to say. 'Yes.' He found his wording. 'She's the mortal who can see through glamours.'

'Who is also your *fatum amantes* I hear.' She said with a pointed eyebrow. When

Rydal didn't answer, a musical laugh sounded from her. 'You forget Rydal, I am your Queen, it's my job to know these things.' She looked up and over to Melody. 'She seems like a sweet girl, it's a shame she might be dragged into this.'

Rydal looked down at the table, a fae life for a human can be too overwhelming for their minds to comprehend. The soft chime from the café door snapped him out of his thoughts. Both his and Faylen's bodies tensed, ready for action, while the Queen just stared blankly at her hands.

'How can I help you?' Rydal heard Melody ask.

The stranger laughed. 'I'm here every week Melody, surely you know what's going on by now.'

Something cold and twisted ran through Rydal's veins, as if he should know that voice, know that laugh from somewhere but his memory came up blank.

Suddenly, the Queen took off her hood and rose to her feet, eyes widening. 'I don't believe it.' She whispered. 'I told myself it couldn't be true.'

Rydal and Faylen jumped to their feet, shielding her with their bodies.

The stranger turned and Rydal could see the marking across his face that Melody had drawn for him the week before. His marking was similar to the assassins' but his was more elegant, colours of gold and white smoothly blended into one another. His eyes went straight to the Queens and an arrogant smirk formed on his face. 'Hello little sister.'


NICOLE BUTLER

A marriage

The world outside was covered in a layer of frost, a breeze came through the slight gap in the window. Jane had refused to close it when her husband, Mike, left for his business trip, wanting to remove the smell of his cigarettes. He had told her when he came back from the trip he would give the habit up. Yet, in the thirty minutes he had been back all he had done was chain smoked and not said a word to her. The smoke and silence mixed together, slowly suffocating her, the small crack in the window seemed to have no effect on easing her pain.


Scrolling through the list of jobs on the site, Jane sighed. She scanned the fifth page of jobs, adding some to the 'save later' pile. She switched tabs and started reviewing a recipe. She double-checked that she had bought all the ingredients. She wanted to do this for the two of them, have a fancy meal with some intimate time that they never got any more. She wanted for the two of them to enjoy each other's company but now she looked at him and wanted only for the silence to become bearable.

Jane glanced over at Mike sat on the opposite end of the sofa. Still in his suit, he sat huddled over a notebook. He scribbled notes in a handwriting indecipherable as he listened to the person on the other end of the phone. He replied with the occasional 'yes sir' and 'got it'. Jane noticed his leg bouncing as he spoke, a nervous tick Jane thought he was over. She reached out and put her hand on his leg to comfort him. As he turned to look at her, Jane caught a slight furrow in his brow that seemed to disappear almost as soon as she had seen it. Mike placed his hand on top of hers, but even the sweat couldn't hide the cold distance between them. He moved



his hand from hers, checking his watch and went back to making notes, as if she had never been there. Jane moved her hand. She fiddled with her wedding ring, slipping it off for a moment. It felt natural to be free of it. Jane put the ring back on. She reached for the white wine on the table in front her, filling both of their glasses.

The phone call ended, and Mike put his phone down on the table in front of him, careful to miss the overfilled ashtray. Jane watched over the rim of her glass as Mike picked his own up and downed half the contents in a single swig. Mike had always enjoyed his white wine, but Jane had noticed how he could finish a whole bottle by himself in a night. Often, he would wait until they were watching a movie, or she was about to go to bed for his drink, basking in the silence and darkness. Jane knew what being wine-drunk could do to Mike, the things he could say. She would never say it, but sometimes Mike being drunk was the time she looked forward to because at least he would start a conversation.



Jane snapped her thoughts back to the recipe. She scrolled through each step, taking every word in. She knew how to cook steak, and she knew how Mike liked his medium rare, but she found herself worrying and fretting over every detail. She was driving herself crazy, looking over the recipe again. She exited the page. She would be fine. She opened up her email tab instead and refreshed but there was nothing new since the last time she checked.

Jane went to close the screen, catching a glimpse of herself in her reflection before doing so. Every bad decision she had made lately was starting to show. The concealer she had layered up under her eyes did very little for the dark circles that surrounded them. She patted the make-up down in an attempt to blend the make-up out but with very little success. Unhappy with the view, she closed the screen. Without the screen to keep her company, she pulled her legs

up to her and hugged herself. She felt vulnerable, thinking about what she had done when Mike was away. She was tired of hiding her mistakes, her skin showed it, but how was she to address it?

She looked over at their wedding photo in the corner of the room. A layer of dust sat on the frame. She looked at how happy she and Mike were, smiles on both their faces.

Jane stood up and headed to the window to allow herself some fresh air. A couple was walking down the street, hand in hand, smiling. They looked picture perfect, like the love they felt for each other was real, unable to get enough of each other. Jane watched them turn the corner and then caught Mike in the window reflection; sitting there, immersed in his work ever since he got back from his trip. Her husband, paying no attention to her at all. Her husband who she wasn't sure she loved anymore.

She pushed the thought out of her mind. Feeling guilty could make a person think odd things and that's all this was. However, standing there, watching him through a reflection in a window, she wondered if it was more than just guilt. She looked away.

Jane wished now that Mike would speak to her. She didn't want to think about the question in her head. She wanted to talk to her husband, but did he want to talk to her? He hadn't said a word when he was on the trip and still hadn't said anything since. Was he angry? No, there was nothing to be mad about, he couldn't know what she'd done. No one other than her and the other man knew.

She felt herself getting worked up. Her thoughts were loud in her head and she hated it.

'Are you hungry?' Jane asked.

She watched as he nodded, silent as he reviewed his notes.

'I'm going to make steak and a nice salad tonight,' she said. Jane smiled at him awaiting a response.

‘Sounds good,’ Mike said.

‘Maybe you could help me, like old times,’ Jane said.

‘Sorry, I have a ton of work to do.’

Jane scoffed and leaned back on the sofa, crossing her arms.

‘You’ve been doing that since you got back. I’m trying to do something nice, you ungrateful dick.’

Mike looked at her, his eyebrows raised, his mouth set in a firm line. He shook his head as he picked his notes up and started walking away.

‘You want to do something nice? Leave me alone in my study.’ He said.

*

Jane looked at the finished result. The meal placed perfectly on the plates, Mike’s steak smothered in sauce the way he liked it, hers only on the salad. She was proud of the meal. A feeling of guilt washed over her. Jane knew she overreacted. She only wanted him to help so she had an escape from the silence.

Jane washed her hands and headed upstairs to Mike. She could hear his voice and guessed he was on the phone to work. She knocked and then pushed the door open and popped her head around the corner. Mike was sitting behind his desk, his laptop opened up. Documents were sprawled around his desk.

‘Dinner is ready,’ Jane said. She smiled at him slightly.

‘Alright I will finish up and be there in a second,’ Mike replied, turning to focus on his work.

Jane nodded and closed the door. As she walked away, she heard him resume the conversation he was having. She stopped at the top of the stairs when she heard him laugh, a sound Jane

hadn't heard for a while. Whoever Mike was talking to, Jane knew it wasn't work related.

Attempting to ignore it, she headed downstairs and placed the meal on the dining table. She placed Mike's plate, making sure she didn't spill any of the sauce. She placed hers opposite. Jane looked at the scene. This is what her life had come to: an over the top meal that won't be appreciated, glasses of wine filled to the brim and an almost empty wine bottle in the middle. The sight might have been romantic if Jane had felt even a little excited to have some time with her husband. Instead, all she could do was let out a little laugh at herself. She knew this meal was just an attempt to hide their sins. She doubted that it was enough.

She took a seat by her plate, eyeing the food she was proud of. The seat cushion was hard under her as she sat. The last time she had sat here, Jane had told Mike over dinner that she had lost her job. She remembered the way he avoided her gaze whilst trying to comfort her. The disappointment he tried to hide.

Jane stood up. She didn't want to be there alone. She had had enough of eating alone and of thinking about the old times. She headed upstairs to get Mike.

As she approached the door, she slowed. She could hear Mike on the phone. He sounded happy. The one-word answers Jane was used to hearing had been replaced with questions and answers. A conversation. She placed a hand on the side of the door to steady herself as she peeked in.

Mike was smiling. The creases near his eyes had deepened and his dimples were showing. Jane had forgotten the beauty of his dimples.

'I want to stay longer but I...' Mike stopped and laughed at the person on the other end of the phone.

Jane watched as her work obsessed husband turned into a schoolboy on the phone to his crush. She stepped away.

A pang of sadness shot through her, as she realised that they had grown further apart than she thought. She closed the door over and headed back down the stairs. Her thoughts were elsewhere as she tripped over his suitcase that rested at the bottom of the stairs. The suitcase tumbled over and his jacket that was thrown on top was now on the floor. As she went to pick it up, she noticed a faint smell of feminine perfume. She picked the jacket up and brought it closer to her and could smell the sweet scent. She knew it wasn't hers. She put the suitcase and jacket the way it had been.

She didn't know what to do from here. He was having an affair. She didn't feel angry. She was disappointed, that things had gotten to this point; that they were sneaking behind each other's back. She knew she didn't love him the way she used to. Both of them had tried to make it work but after standing there, watching him smile, she realised neither of them could give anymore. This was a marriage but neither of them were happy.

Jane sat back at the dining table; and drank as much wine as she could in one gulp.

She heard his footsteps as he came down the stairs. She sat herself up but couldn't get herself to face him. Her face would give away everything and she wasn't sure she was ready to talk about it or them. To talk about his affair would mean she would have to admit what she had done as well. Both parties would be hurt. She just wanted to hold on to a few more moments together.

'Work took a bit longer than I thought it would,' Mike said as he took a seat.

Jane nodded as she took a sip of her drink. She could sense

him looking at her and felt her face get warm. The alcohol was starting to take effect.

'I didn't get a chance to give you this earlier because... ' Mike paused, 'because I was preoccupied, but here.'

Jane looked up as Mike handed her a bottle of her favourite red wine. She looked at him shocked and then forced a smile.

'Thank you. What's the occasion?' She asked as she admired the bottle.

'Just thought I would treat you,' he said as he took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket. She watched him put one to his lips, her face getting warmer.

It annoyed her that he could sit there and act like they were fine, how he could just light a cigarette and move on with his life. Jane hated how happy he was.

'Can you not do that right now?' She asked.

'Just open the window a little further,' he said, dismissing her and lighting the cigarette.

She watched as he took a long puff of the cigarette, flicking the ash on the empty ashtray and then blowing out, the smoke aiming straight for her. She turned her face, wafting the smoke with her hand.

'No, I won't just open the window a little further. You can just put that cigarette out now or smoke outside,' she said, annoyed.

'Stop whinging,' he said as he rolled his eyes.

'Jesus, just listen for once! I tried to make a meal for the two of us and you're blowing that smoke all over it.'

'Fuck sake,' he mumbled under his breath, as he stood up and headed outside to finish his cigarette.

The smoke lingered as he stormed off. Everything in the house smelled of ash. It was disgusting and whilst he might not care, she

did. She picked up the ash tray. Opening the front door, she flung it out into the garden, the wind blowing it on to him.

'Watch it!' he shouted.

She shrugged her shoulders and walked back into the house. He followed close behind. She could hear him rubbing the ash off his suit.

'Why did you do that?' he said.

'Is it annoying because now you'll smell like ash. You don't care about the smell any other time.'

She sat down and started on her dinner, ignoring him examining his suit.

'You can be so fucking spiteful sometimes,' he said.

'Like you're a saint,' she mumbled.

He ignored her and started on his own food. They sat there in silence, chewing angrily. The sound of his knife and fork scraping the plate as he cut with excessive force, made her regret ever cooking.

'Lord knows why I thought I could do something nice for us. You can't even talk to me,' Jane said as she put her cutlery down and looked at Mike.

'What is there for us to talk about?' he asked, irritated.

'Fucking anything! We never talk anymore and it's so frustrating!'

'That's my fault? If you want to talk so bad, then let's talk about how you always shut off from me! You have a go at me over something and then stop talking to me. What am I meant to do? I am not going to beg a conversation with my own wife!'

'Stop making me the bad guy! If you would listen to me in the first place, I wouldn't have to nag you! It's not always my fault. Stop being such a dick and think about things!'

They both sat there looking at each other frustrated, neither of them backing down. This was the first time she got to properly

look at his face. His eyes were dark, stubborn creases sat etched in his forehead. He looked older than he was, more troubled. She could see how unhappy he was, and she imagined that her face mirrored his. She looked away, unable to keep looking at what they had become.

When did things get so bad? She remembered when they would sit and laugh; when she would get up and help him with his tie in the morning. Now, she could barely be bothered to wake up for when he would return home from a trip. She hated what they had become. Her eyes stung as tears formed.

'We can't keep living like this. All we do is argue and then ignore each other,' he said, rubbing his forehead.

'You think I don't know that? That I can't see what we've become? I know what goes on behind the scenes, the things we keep from each other,' she replied.

Mike stayed silent.

'Your face says it all,' she said.

'I don't—'

'I know there's another woman. I guessed as much when I saw you on the phone to her in the office earlier.'

He didn't say anything. Now was her chance to confess her own sins. She took a deep breath.

'There was another man. . . while you were gone. It was only a one-night thing, but I can't sit here and pretend it never happened,' she said.

Mike slowly ate some of his food. He didn't say anything. She wanted a response or something to work with, but he just sat there, not saying anything. She felt like she was back to square one with the suffocating silence. They needed to get things out in the open and he seemed to want to hide away. She was done with hiding;

she had been doing that all night and all it had done was get her worked up.

'Fucking hell, say something!' she shouted.

His hand rubbed his chin as he took a breath. She wondered if this was how he felt when she shut herself off.

'I hate this,' she said as she put her plate to one side, no longer hungry. She was now crying. The tears leaving warm trails on her cold face.

'Are you happy with me?' he asked, his voice soft.

She looked at him. His eyes were now looking into hers, waiting for a response. She was searching his for the answer he wanted. She knew the real question he was asking. The question asked for one word, but there was so much meaning behind the one word. The marriage would be affected from this moment on. Although, wasn't it already effected by the things they hid from each other?

He knew what she was going to say. The silence said what she wouldn't. He wasn't upset or angry, part of him expected it. He simply nodded his head and sipped his drink.

'I'm sorry. I don't love you like I used to,' she whispered.

She struggled to get the words to leave her mouth. It was sour and she hated having to say them, but it had to be done. She now felt like the window had been thrown open and she had been left bare. She couldn't look at him.

'You were right. I have been having an affair,' he said.

She watched his face as his eyebrows loosened and the creases in his forehead eased. He looked relieved that she knew, that there were no secrets. She nodded. She wiped away the remaining tears. She couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when she stopped loving him, but she could tell that right then was when things were going to change.

They sat there processing everything that had just happened. They didn't mind each other's company because at that point, they felt free.

'Where do we go from here?' She asked.

They knew there was no going back to how they were, too much had happened and been said. They knew how each other felt, everything was out in the open.

For a moment, he thought about it. Scared, she watched him. She had nowhere else to go, and no job to help herself.

'I don't know. We will figure it out but for now, I'm here to support you until you get a new job.' He said.

He stood up and grabbed his jacket off his suitcase.

'Where are you going?' She asked.

'I'm going to get some air. I will be back later.'

Jane watched him. He looked back at her with a sad look. She let him go, she could see he needed the space. Jane smiled back.

The door closed and she stood up heading to the window. She watched as he walked past and down the street. She smiled to herself, glad that they were both free from hiding from one another. For now, things would be okay.

EMILY CASTELINO

Like A Broken Mirror

Written on behalf of a friend who wishes to remain anonymous — detailed descriptions have been provided.

I grew up privileged. No, scratch that. I grew up with filthy rich parents. Have you ever seen one of those London Victorian suburb homes with the high hedgerows and gargoyled gothic gates out front? Yeah. That kind of rich.

My father was a high rolling, people pleasing, money making machine working alongside the German banks. My mother was a city corporate lawyer, who would take on any winning case that would obliterate the chances of senior colleagues taking over her spot as the next potential named partner.

And well... then there's me. Jacob. Average build, average face (6/10 at best) with very very average aspirations. I was forced into a private preparatory school full of caviar sucking, egocentric, red faced brats; all with the shared desire to live off 'mummy and daddy's money'. I wasn't anything like them. I could've turned out the same, but something inside of me felt like I wasn't supposed to be this way. Like I wasn't supposed to look down on anyone who didn't have three Rolex heirlooms.

This was probably the reason I wasn't very popular. I spent most of my days playing on the old, weary and tired piano in the assembly hall. It helped me concentrate; it helped me feel sane. My parents were always too busy to spend time with me so I guess that would be why they were so successful.

Miriam was my au pair from birth and the general household maid. She was always the one who would cook for me, pick me up if I'd fallen and supply me with secret scoops of ice cream to eat

when my mother wasn't looking. As I got older, she'd scold me for leaving my clothes on the floor but would always be there standing with a Blockbuster DVD and some popcorn when I needed consoling. She would always be the only person who would show me real love. It's safe to say she was my best friend; my *only* friend.

At the age of seventeen, I watched her doing her normal household duties. Suddenly her left arm dropped my mother's best Flora Danica salad plate causing it to smash into a thousand pieces in an instant. Her left knee buckled shortly after as she collapsed to the ground frantically clawing at her chest. Mother said she had a hereditary heart condition, but she had so much love in that very heart that I believed it to be impossible to break. I watched the warmth drain from her body, turning her yellow; then blue.

I had no emotion. I grabbed my long black overcoat and left. For days. Maybe a week. I don't know. I just got away from there as soon as I could.

I found little comfort in anything and I needed to numb the pain. The short fix: drugs. I was a party animal; skipping school, binge drinking six times a week. I always managed to keep a spare £10 note in the corner of my wallet, rolled up tightly, to polish off each and every next face numbing kerosene tasting powdered white line. At the time I thought, 'fuck it,' and smiled to myself, 'this is how I'm supposed to live my life; like the king of the fucking world.'

Safe to say, that feeling did not last for long.

The first time *it* happened, I was at Miriam's funeral. It was the first time I had properly returned home in over a month. Everyone wore black; she didn't like black. I wore a blue suit, only to have my mother look at me as if I had been the one to disrespect Miriam's wishes – with no care for where I had been all this time. I paid

little attention to my Mother as she had done to me over the past seventeen years of my life. My focus was on the woman who had truly cared for me. I watched as she was graciously lowered into the ground in a beautiful walnut coffin, whilst the silence amongst the mist was met with a cold stir of late January wind.

As I took a deep breath, I looked out across the graveyard. The light was low. It was a dark day altogether but when my eyes met it – my vision could not have been clearer. I could see a version of myself, slimmer; almost malnourished, wearing clothes I had never seen before. But it was unmistakably me. I looked sick, *really* sick. My neck was deeply bruised all over, with hues of purple scored horizontally. They were noose marks. I'd been hanged. Or at least that's what it looked like.

In a panic of overwhelming loss of air, I briskly walked away from the service to the sound of a drowning 'dust to dust' and shakily pulled a short of whisky out of my inside pocket. My head was turning like a spinning top, and my stomach churned. I stepped behind a bush and, trying to not draw attention to myself, retched on my liquid breakfast until my stomach emptied its contents. I needed a fix, and quickly. Somewhere, in one of my pockets, was a gram of cocaine, wrapped up neatly in a little white paper package. I rummaged through each pocket, my head sweaty, until I found the little envelope containing the magic powder that would make this all better. One key to stop the chaos.

I looked up again to where I'd seen myself, my heart beating fast in my chest. To my relief, it wasn't there – why would it be there? Why would that be real. I laughed, releasing the air from my lungs as the burn from the cocaine began to drip down the back of my throat. 'I'm just seeing things. Get a grip,' I told myself, turning back towards the funeral party. I made my excuses quickly and left,

hailing a cab from outside the cemetery gates. I had no idea where to go, I just knew I needed to get away.

A week passed without remark, and I went back to my life of outrageous parties. During this time, I met someone. She was as fucked up as me, a wild little party animal with an infectious smile and a dirty mind. I wasn't looking for anything serious, but neither was she. It was perfect. I hadn't ever taken a girl home, but through the days and nights spent in east London couch surfing – I'd soon run out of money and realised that I had to return to my parent's 'humble' abode. She asked to come with me and quite frankly, I needed the distraction.

Before she could comment on my apparent wealth upon arriving at the tall Victorian gates of my family estate, I shushed her and rushed her straight up the long driveway, past the great oak tree and around to the side entrance which brought us up into the house through the pantry.

'Your house is so bloody big,' she drawled whilst lighting a cigarette. She constantly had a cigarette on the go. I covered her mouth with my hand and threw away her cigarette, stubbing it out with the toe of my battered Doc Martens. Taking my hand away, I replaced it with my own mouth. She reciprocated, leaning into me, deepening the kiss. I took her by the hand and led her to my bedroom, both of us tearing at each other's clothes, not caring if my parents were home.

On entering my room, she pulled away from me and giggled. My room was outdated, to say the least. Aeroplane bedsheets covered the single bed and the big window was framed by curtains also patterned with planes. My parents hadn't cared enough to update the room, and I was never home long enough to want to do it myself. However, this was my sanctuary. The window had a

little ledge under it, big enough to sit on, and I whiled away many lonely hours looking out the bay window at the great oak tree. She poked at my collarbone.

'It's okay,' she whispered. 'I'll pretend it's a big boy's room.' She proceeded to kiss down my neck and my chest. The further down she got, the greater my disinterest grew. As the grey skies darkened, I pushed her away and walked over to the window. A chill ran down my spine as I looked out.

I was there again. Well, the vision of me was there again, just under the solid oak tree. It couldn't be me though. I knew I was in my bedroom, I could feel the wood of the window frame solidly beneath my fingers, so *who* was that? My knees buckled and my breathing grew shallow as I panicked. The lacerations on his neck were still there, but now the vision was closer, I could see deep cuts to the wrists, dripping blood as he stood there, deathly still, staring up at the window

'You...can you see that?' I asked her, turning my face from the horrible vision outside into the gloomy room, where she sat on the bed, tapping her fingers impatiently. She jumped up and came to join me at the window.

'What are you on about? I can't see anything?' she said, and I turned. The vision had gone. There was no trace that he had ever been there, and the oak tree stood strong and proud as it had always done.

'You've gone as white as a sheet. What the hell is wrong?' she asked, touching my face.

'Nothing. Nothing, it doesn't matter.' I said, shaking my head. 'You need to leave now, it's home time, I mean, it's late and I need to go to bed.' Saying this, I picked up her coat, and pushed her out the door. No kiss, no cuddle. She made a slight noise of protestation

as I pushed, but she must have thought I was as weird as I thought myself to be at the moment, as she didn't resist. I watched her walk down the great driveway, but could not bring myself to look as far as the oak tree. I was terrified I'd see the vision again. That was the last time I saw her.

For the next three days, I didn't leave my room. Heck, I didn't even open the curtains. I was going crazy, scared that in every dark corner my vision was hiding, ready to reveal fresh hell to me. Since Miriam had gone, I had barely seen my parents. They were always on a business trip, a fancy holiday, out for dinner. When they were home, they were shut away in their respective study. No time for their only child, and they didn't seem to notice that I was becoming more and more reclusive. The only thing that kept me going was the mixture of drugs I took, both illegal and prescription. A line of cocaine to wake me up in the morning, two pills of tramadol to bring me down from my cocaine high, a joint to get me nicely buzzed, more cocaine to stop the fatigue, some diazepam to stop the anxiety, a teaspoon of morphine to help me sleep, all rounded off with plenty of neat whiskey. With this concoction, I was so out of it that I didn't care if I saw the vision again, in fact I welcomed him to break up the monotony of life. Until I accidentally overdosed.

Waking up in the hospital room, attached to beeping machines and tubes everywhere, I was still on my own. I later found out my father had found me, face down on the floor, called the ambulance, and then went back to work. My mother hadn't even left her study. Her work was more important to her than her seventeen-year-old child, and in the next few days she, nor my father, visited at all. Doctors mentioned their excuses were due to disappointment. Yeah right! Fuckers.

The doctors were alright, apart from the never-ending lectures on drug taking. That was the hardest bit, going cold turkey. I had always relied on the jumble of drugs to get me through each day and now they were replaced by a sad, single solitary pill. It was given to me in a small paper cup and I was watched closely as I swallowed it. I had to see a therapist daily, and in a bid to get myself discharged from rehab, I opened up more and more about my personal life until finally we got on to the subject of my vision. I told her about the cuts and lacerations on him, well... me, and I was quickly labelled as a schizophrenic. I was put on controlled medication – two pills this time – and made to attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings within the hospital. They said the vision was just that – a vision. I began to believe what they said, so I worked on getting myself clean. To face reality once again. I attended group sessions with people who were going through the same thing, and slowly but surely, I began to feel better. My eighteenth birthday came and went, and I realised that it had been two weeks without seeing the vision. I began to think I was cured.

Until the week before I was due to be discharged, was a cold day, and the mist hung low over the ground. There was a kind of eerie silence enveloping the compound. It was similar to the day we buried Miriam, and I was thinking about her whilst pottering about the room. About how much I missed her, and how she would have been here every day, unlike my parents. Then I looked out the window into the garden. And my heart dropped. He was back. My vision. Hanging from a tree, with the mist pooling round his ankles. His skin was blue and his head was turned to one side, with his eyes bulging. I gasped and dropped the photo frame I was holding, shattering into pieces and cutting my bare foot. Suddenly he dropped – the noose had broken and he landed on all fours,

coughing and convulsing. I could hear him trying to draw harsh gasps of breath. I screamed for help, but no one was about. Fuck, I'd have to go myself. I ran out of the room, not bothering to put shoes on, and into the garden.

But he wasn't there. I stopped dead, frantically looking around for something, anything. The tree stood strong, real, but there was no noose round the branch and no sign that someone had ever been there. I thought I was better, that I'd stopped seeing visions. And this time I couldn't blame the drugs. I'd been cold turkey for three weeks and had seen nothing within that time. Was the vision real or was it in my mind? I didn't know what was real and what wasn't. Had I gone truly crazy? What the fuck was going on? There was more to this than people were telling me, I was sure. Someone wasn't telling me the truth and I needed answers. I knew I had to get access to the file room.

Picking the lock wasn't hard. I'd learnt to pick the kitchen door lock at a young age to steal Miriam's freshly baked cookies. I just had to wait till the night staff took over, as they didn't earn enough to care what the patients were up to. As far as they were concerned, unless a patient left the compound, it wasn't their problem. I knew they'd have the files ordered alphabetically, and I found the thick folder in no time at all. I opened it, being careful not to make too much noise in case the night staff actually got off their arses and checked where the sound was coming from.

What I found in the file I could never have expected. This was not the first time I had been in therapy. By the looks of things, I'd spent my earliest years in therapy, and I kept seeing the words 'childhood trauma'. What the fuck was childhood trauma? I flicked through the pages, until I found what I was looking for. Adoption papers. My real parents were not the people I called Mother and

Father now. Flicking further through the file, I discovered that my parents had died in a crash, when I was a baby. Then I saw something that made my heart skip a beat.

I had a brother. A twin, identical. The photos in the file showed that, and even I couldn't tell which one was me and which was the twin. We were similar in every way. Was this who I'd been seeing? Had my twin come to find me? Reading on, we had ended up in a foster home, and split when we were young. I was adopted, by a wealthy couple who couldn't have children of their own. He was a 'problem' child, and bounced from foster home to orphanage, always being overlooked for the younger, more cute children. I skipped towards the back, where the newer papers were kept. I wanted to know what had happened to him, why I kept seeing him and how he disappeared so quickly. Soon enough, I found my answer. There was a copy of a death certificate and a police report. My twin had died the day Miriam died. He had slashed his wrists, and when the cops found him, he was hanging from a ceiling rafter by a noose, blood pooled around the floor below him. He had never been chosen, and, weeks from being turfed out of the orphanage for turning 18, he had killed himself.

For the first time, I realised how lucky I was. My adoptive parents may not have seemed to have cared that much, may not have been close to me, but they had never seen me go without. I had everything I could possibly want. I never went without. My brother didn't have that. Maybe that's why I had seen him. He was trying to tell me that I was the privileged one. That, actually, things could have been worse. I hadn't been on my own. I'd had Miriam too, a loving figure that he would never have known. I knew what I had to do, mend the relationship with the people I called my parents. They had lost Miriam too, and they must have found it hard. They

didn't know how to deal with a son with a drug addiction. I had to be a better person.

I guess it takes just one look into a broken mirror to understand the truth in your reflection.

REBECCA CAVANAGH

Deeds of a mourner

Funerals are always tricky – this one was no exception. I got out of the hearse and saw dozens of family members in the car park: there was Aunt Jessica, standing with a permanent grimace next to her partner Derek, his head bowed. And my Nan, Grandad, and Cousin Mark. The rest were irrelevant to me. For my older brother, Dylan, (or Dyl for short) that's a bigger crowd than he'd expect.

Mind you, he thought only two people would attend – me and Mark.

I started to walk into the funeral hall, a step out of reality and with my throat hoarse from crying. My voice was just a croak, but luckily, I had time before my eulogy.

The room was painted a pale lavender, reminiscent of a dead body. It made my stomach churn. I thought to myself 'This didn't look like the best place to put the dead to rest.'

I found a pew in the top right of the room and sat down; Mark sat down next to me. I gave a slight nod to him and hoped he couldn't see the tear stains on my face. With my Cousin, it didn't matter – you could run him over and he'd still try to be understanding... Probably.

Admittedly, *Bohemian Rhapsody* isn't the song you expect to hear as the coffin gets carried through the aisle, but you've got to admit it sure as hell is a send-off.

Luckily, hymn no. 5 was about to come up. Not that Dyl wanted hymns – he thought God was a piece of shit, but when you're put in charge of a funeral and your Gran, Grandad and the ghost of your parents look at you like the family disappointment, and try

to hijack the funeral planning, you feel obliged to put in a couple of songs to appease them.

I guess I should feel lucky there's something to guide Dyl into the afterlife; I can pretend he is safe. I'm not sure about everyone else, with the way Aunt Jessica is acting, they don't give a fuck.

Once the song and the unwanted hymn played it was my time to give the reading. This bit I don't mind, standing in front of the family at the podium. I get the words, out easily, the 'I love you's' and the 'we shared many good times', knowing no one could touch these words with silly hymns or crocodile tears. They were mine – untouchable, unreadable.

Yet, in the corner of my eye, Aunt Jessica had the audacity to whisper to her partner (who's trying to hide he's on his phone... In church). I grip my sheet of paper a little harder. They do know I'm speaking, right? She does know that, technically, this is my moment to say goodbye? I keep getting the words, but instead of my decent repetition, I got choked up by festering (?) anger, instead of grief.

This isn't how my final recount of my brother pranking me on my 16th with silly string they took that moment away from me right now!

I finish my reading, bow my head, and go back to my pew through, gritted teeth

The next reading is from my Gran, small and could nag you to death... She sure as hell did it to me and Dylan enough. Her black attire washed her out.

'Thank you for coming here today. We're here to celebrate the life of Dylan, my grandson.' It was a typical opening and it was a decent speech. Almost nothing was wrong with it... *Almost*.

Then the hypocrisy began, as Nan continued, 'We always told Dyl we loved him, although they had a bad time, he knew we always had their best interest at heart and could always come to us.'

LIE! You were never satisfied with what he did, you never displayed any pride, not ever! I continued listening to the speech, biting my lip. Granted, my Nan might not know this, but surely, she should have some inkling, right? Maybe I'm being too harsh, or maybe I'm not. From that moment, I stayed fixated on the speech. We had another song (and a couple of prayers I rejected at the time of organising the funeral, but even though I was in charge Nan and Grandad vetoed that). Not that they knew what my brother needed or wanted. When he fell on the floor because he couldn't feel his feet, it was left to me to sort out his medication, *me*. They never visited him before his death.

Once the hymns ended, I walked – well, tried to walk back to the car but I'm sure it was more of a dash. I clenched my fists, kept my head down, and ignored everyone as I opened the door. Now to get through the wake. I dreaded being back at Dyl's flat and the miserable buffet.

As I sat down, my Cousin got in next to me, instead of going with his Mum and Dad, 'You're not okay either, huh,' he said sadly, putting a hand on my shoulder, and then putting his seatbelt on.

I was grateful for the comfort; It was one of the few things I felt instead of being numb in the pit of my core. At least with Mark I could trust he meant it.

'No shit, Sherlock,' I said to him. 'It would be better if your Mum and Dad weren't being dicks!'

'Yeah, I know.'

'Nan and Grandad didn't give Dyl the funeral he wanted, ignored me for what he wanted, even though I was his carer for months! Then had the fucking audacity to say they cared! This is bullshit!' I said exasperated, so furious I had a hard time buckling my seatbelt.

‘It’s unfair, I know – I remember the I.a.m. phone calls, Em, don’t worry... Listen. We’ll just get the buffet sorted at your flat and then we can complain in peace.’ He looked at me. Mark being sad is new, but then the loss of Dylan is new too.

‘Dylan’s flat,’ I corrected him.

The car ride back to Dyl’s flat was one of mutual silence, which wasn’t broken ’til I got through the front door and into the dining room. Everything remained the same – same tattered sofa, same TV that liked to move from HDMI to TV on a whim, and on the coffee table in the living room a picture of me and Mark with Dyl, his hair side-swept, his smile full. This was taken before the times where I was helping carry him from the bathroom to his bed, counting up to sixteen different meds before the chronic cough swept in and pneumonia took him.

Mark poked me in the arm. ‘Earth to Em, where do you want me to put the food?’

The food was set up; sandwiches, sausage rolls, and canapés were all laid on a table in the kitchen.

Jessica and her partner were already here and helping themselves to the buffet, Nan and Grandad are late, which is unusual for them... Car crash? Decided not to come? No, they’d ring, wouldn’t they? I notice their absence with around 40 family members packed into a small flat. I’m struggling to move through.

How? My brother was just laid to rest! Do they all hate him this much?

The buzzer went loudly, picking me up from whatever anxious day dream I was having. I went to get the door, sighing as I opened it.

They gave me a hug and continued into the kitchen.

‘Hmm, you haven’t redecorated yet, have you?’ she said with a

disgusted look on her face. 'Maybe you should, it's your flat now. We can help get it ready for you.'

Why would I change it when this is what I'm used to? I've lived here as Dyl's carer for four years. I'm used to his home – my home – being like this, are they trying to erase his memory already? Like the coffee table they took from Mum and Dad after they died?

'Don't worry about it now, Nan, just grab a sandwich.' I took their coats and hung them on the door before grabbing a plate of food.

'Nan start on you?' Mark said coming up behind me to grab a sausage roll and seeing my face, he said, 'That's a yes!' I assume it was one of thunder or one with an eye roll, either way, I was starting to get even more deflated than this morning.

I decided to speak to Aunt Jess and Derek (not that I wanted to) whenever I looked at them, I felt my hands gripping tightly over the paper that contained my speech, but my Mum would smite me if I wasn't polite.

Going to the corner of the room, they were talking to one of the family members on Dad's side, Trish I think, she was going grey and you'd mistake her for my Gran at first glance, but she's taller.

'Eh up, love, how are you feeling?' Asked my uncle smiling at me.

'I'm alright Derek, thanks, funeral went alright, I guess.' I replied, my voice quiet and meek, a sign I was getting fed up with the smiley mourners.

'It was a lovely service now, darling. Hey, now, he's at peace, he'll be up there walking now, you know,' Jessica added between mouthfuls of sandwich.

Did she just insinuate what I think she just insinuated? I'm not having that, that isn't right. Somehow, my stomach felt a blaze and not numb or deflated anymore.

‘Are you saying that not being able to walk is worse than death? Are you saying his life was worthle—’

‘Oh... Er no, cour—’

‘Good, because you weren’t here for the past few years! Heck, where the fuck were ya when he was screeching in pain and I didn’t get a wink?’ I might be numb in some areas, but I was aware enough to see the stain of shame on her face.

‘You don’t get to say the value of his life, you don’t tell me or him whether he was in pain! Dyl would tell you but he isn’t here,’ I say with an added bit of venom and leave the conversation to go and find Mark.

Except I couldn’t see him in the living room; all I could see were family members I wanted to punch, either by association, or because they’re hypocritical pricks pretending to be nice to ‘respect the dead’. How could they be so talkative and loud today?

I called out for him; my voice shaky. He runs up, guides me to a chair, and grabs me a cup of water. It’s cold, but it works to calm me down.

‘Em, you’re not okay. Go get some rest,’ he says quietly so no one notices the weird moment I just had. I swear I can feel Jessica’s eyes leering at me... Would be the first time this family notices something!

‘No, it’s fine. Just give me a minute, just need to be away from those fucks,’ I nod my head towards our aunt and uncle.

‘With every second I’m glad they ain’t my parents. Want some food?’

‘No, thanks. Go talk to someone else if you want, I’ll be fine.’ I sipped another bit of water. Mark raised his eyebrows at me but then left to go and join his Mum and Dad.

I was starting to calm down till my Nan and Grandad came up to me. ‘Emily Parker, why are you sitting down? Go and socialise,

everyone will think you're impolite.' Nan grabbed the water out of my hand and put it next to the sink in the kitchen.

Why can't she leave me alone to grieve how I want? I'm literally sitting down. Surely, they'd understand, would it make it easier for them to notice if I started to look at the photo on the coffee table? I took the photo and I went to the tattered sofa from the car boot sale of '09 and stared at the photo trying to remember some of the good times. I felt a bit more complete looking at the photo. It was a memory where Dyl managed to get a strike rolling the ball backward at the bowling alley, and Mark spilled slushy on himself. I chuckled. It felt a bit silly at his funeral and hypocritical seeing as I've moaned at everyone else. I didn't see them plan this funeral, though.

'Emily, go and present—' I could hear my Nan cutting off the complaint as she saw the photo in my hands. 'That's one of my favourite photos of you three, it's a bit old though Em... Don't you ever feel like changing it?'

'No,' I say sternly.

'But there's plenty of others you know, if you went for the one on the—'

'I said NO didn't I?' It was bold of me to use such a stern tone.

'But it'll be good for you, y'know,' she says, grabbing for the photo frame.

'I don't care, I like these photos, Nan.' I try to move the photo out from her grasp but she manages to knock it to the floor and it breaks.

The picture doesn't shatter, but there is an epicentre of cracks around Dyl's face. Heat rises up from my stomach again, I know it's only a photo frame, but that's the original, the one Dylan wanted and now I have to change it, and I don't want it to change. I'm comfortable with how this house is.

Everybody is staring now.

'Why can you never leave me bloody alone when needed to, and when you are actually damn needed, you're not here!' I shout, picking up the photo frame and putting it back on the coffee table, now out of place.

'I'm... ' Nan stuttered.

'Shut it, you're not! if you were, you would've been here two years ago helping me with my brother. Why are you always so useless?'

I can hear a 'whoa' coming from somewhere before my granddad comes along.

'Listen, Em, we can replace the photo frame, okay? Calm down.'

'No, you shut it! You couldn't let Dyl have the music he wanted. You didn't visit him once in the last year when he couldn't get out of bed. Heck – even his own funeral had to have hymns to suit your needs, I can't even keep the original damned photo frame!' They looked to the floor. I wanted to run away right now, but I didn't want them to know this. I shut up and stare at the floor. I can't ruin Dyl's funeral.

Well, that was till I heard the words be (not so well) whispered from Aunt Jessica to Derek, 'Would help if he wasn't a psycho that got himself in a mental institution every other month.'

I flung at her. I shouldn't have, but to disrespect my brother – my Dyl – like that, on this day, wasn't going to go unchallenged. As I lunged at her I shouted, 'What did you just say?' And tried to slap her. I'm not sure if anything landed. All I know is that the pull of a defensive family member was keeping my muscles going. Many family members tried to break us up. Mark was struggling and had to ask his Dad to help. They separated us; I was a bit too strong and between me, Mark and his Dad, we broke the coffee table. The photo frame went flying, going to pieces this time.

The sound of the photo frame breaking, like an ice lake cracking open, was the thing that got me out of my fight. Seeing the table splintered was a surprise. The photo frame hurt more though; I know it was broken by my standards before, but this was worse – I could barely get the original fixed now, and the photo was all torn up.

Great, more things of my brothers I've lost. More change I didn't need. I didn't need them here either. Did they help? No. I admit the table breaking was my fault, but Nan started it. Why can't these people let me grieve in my own way?!

'Get out!' I shouted as the rage at losing more parts of my brother from my life became too much. I repeated it over and over again, throwing cushions and then breaking down crying as more people started to leave. I was still crying in the middle of the living room when I felt two arms around me and the line, 'I get it Em, calm down,' being repeated to me over and over. I was surprised he stayed but then he's the only decent one in the family... He must be if he wants to comfort in the oblivion I caused Dyl's flat, knowing I couldn't even get past the wake.

ZARIN CHOUDHURY

Gone

The maddening sky outside my window screamed to life as it was burned alive; blazing colours bled into the corrupted clouds, causing a canvas of fire and the shrieking sun slowly died in the remnants of merciless flames. Sunrays coughed into our darkening flat, lighting up the path of scattered items that were littered in a disarray mess all around my shattered pieces. A suffocated sob escaped the confines of my hurting heart and my dejected form curled into a broken ball.

I held onto the soft jacket that was intoxicated with memories of spontaneous rendezvous in the shimmering sun, starry night adventures and the cologne he always clung to like it was a secret cover of comfort for him. I never did understand why he loved that cologne so much, but it never mattered to me; I always adored it because it was his.

And I adored him.

The fragmented letter, on the wooden floor, still spoke his words in the silence that was strangling me like an invisible snake. 'This is too much for me...', 'I need to leave for a while...', 'I need some space...', 'I need to...', 'It's me...'. I shook my head to get rid of it, to get rid of the pain and him and myself because it was too much for me.

'It's me...' Is it me?

It's me.

The torn letter held itself together better than me. I was falling... falling... and I fell onto hands that were never there in the first place. My body smashed onto the cold ground, my mind swirled with poisonous misery and echoes of everything I no longer

understood. Memories flipped through my mind like a book being blasted by an unforgiving wind as a stagnant future loomed over me.

The last tears sulked down my glowing cheeks as a switch flipped and the sun roared back, devouring the horizon with its overpowering glare. My hands shook like leaves in autumn and picked one item up. I put it in a box. I picked another one up; his favourite hoodie. I put it in the box. I slowly continued this process until the little he had left behind was tidied away like my concealed pain.

Soon the only abandoned items were me and the jacket I had worn the entire time. I took it off and gazed at it sweetly – it felt like parting with a friend who had ended up in a crossfire they never wanted to be in.

I lived in his cologne again and then it was gone, taken away by my shaky but firm hands that were still stronger than him. The ruined letter draped over the items like dead ashes of a past I would never give a chance to again.

I deserved better than that. I closed the box and shadowed his world from my light.

Is it me?

It's him.

Proud sunrays smirked into my bright flat, lighting up what had always been here all along; me.

ROBYN DEVON

The Last Girl in Town

The one thing that apocalypse movies never address is the lack of condoms at the end of the world. As the last girl in Dusttown, it was an issue Lyla knew well. There used to be other women but eating rotten food and drinking dirty water had the unfortunate side effect of killing people. That had made her the designated town prostitute, which she was hardly happy about, but it paid well, and she got to eat the least out-of-date beans. Tim was her last patron of the night, and as he wriggled on top of her, inexperienced and tired, she could see the sadness in his eyes. At barely 19, his mother had been the last woman to die, and grief shone out of him. He had a large tab, which she forgave, considering he was grieving, but soon she would need to give him a kick up the arse. Everyone in Dusttown was sad, he was no exception.

He dressed quickly, as he usually did, always having to rush off to get back to Dusttown's pathetic excuse for a farm. He was always toying with something, desperate to grow something edible. He deposited a handful of sunflower seeds on Lyla's bedside table and gave her an apologetic shrug.

'Next time I'll pay up, promise. I'm still nursing those tomatoes, see. I should be able to sell them soon.'

'Why not bring me a tomato then?' She was quite sick of sunflower seeds, but sunflowers seemed to be the only thing he didn't kill.

'They're not ripe yet,' frustration flashed over his face, he opened his mouth to say more but caught himself and dropped his gaze to the floor.

‘Thanks for...’ his face flushed, redder than it had ever been during sex. ‘Sorry,’ he said, and without warning and in a flourish of movement he ran out of the door.

Lyla heaved out a sigh and prodded at the seeds. She felt too nauseated to eat them, despite being hungry. It didn’t help they were interspersed with pocket lint from Tim’s aging jacket. It was practically disintegrating, leaving little flakes of brown leather behind him as he moved. The thing was more mature than he was.

She went to her wardrobe and cracked open a warm beer, as it was better than drinking rusty piss water. She didn’t feel much better for it, and soon yearned for bed. Sticky under a thin blanket thanks to Dusttown’s relentless heat, she would wake frequently in the night, feeling a nagging sense of wrongness. The wrongness had lingered for few weeks now, and it wasn’t like she could just Google it anymore.

The only tool she had was under her bed: a cardboard box of books, one of them a women’s health encyclopaedia from 1984. She couldn’t sleep anyway, so even if she was wrong it would at least bore her to sleep. But after a quick flip through the pregnancy and motherhood section, her doubt only grew, and she started sweating as she ticked off more and more symptoms. She felt cross with herself that she couldn’t recall her last period, or paid much attention to what a state she was in as she arrived at the conclusion she was most likely pregnant. She looked at the cutesy sketch of a new-born as a tear landed on the yellowing page. Having a baby in Dusttown, with only men to assist, all of them squabbling over who’s responsibility the brat would be, was not a viable option. Lyla threw on a lightweight jacket, shoved her feet into unlaced trainers, and bolted out the door.

Tim's 'farm' was only a few doors down from the 'bar' she lived above, and a sad-looking raspberry bush growing (more likely dying) against the wall started thrashing as she hammered on the door.

'Tim! Tim, open up! It's Lyla!'

The door instantaneously swung open, to reveal Tim in his y-fronts pointing a shotgun.

'Jesus! I thought you was gonna rob me.' Tim's voice was still hoarse with sleep, looking relieved to be propping the shotgun by the door again.

'What have you got worth stealing?' Lyla sneered.

'The tomatoes?'

'Fuck the tomatoes! I'm pregnant.' The outburst was met with momentary silence, Tim blinking in astonishment, letting out a small splutter.

'You're pregnant?' Tim laughed humourlessly at Lyla but stopped himself.

'Yes. Well, I think so.'

'It's not mine.'

'That was quick. How can you be so sure?' She put her hands on her hips, hoping that if she looked intimidating enough, he wouldn't notice she was close to tears.

'Well... Shit. What do you want me to do?' His tone wasn't one of malice, he sounded more afraid than anything. Maybe more afraid than she was.

'A favour.'

'Oh God, what – what kind of favour?'

'Don't worry, nothing hands-on. You got a ride?'

'No. Why?'

'What about that horse?'

'We ate it last week.'

'Fuck's sake.'

'Well, go on, tell me why?'

'Gregory. You know, after a few pints he likes to ramble. He said in the next town over there's an abortionist. No idea how legit that claim is, but I don't want a baby, Tim.'

'An abortionist? And I'm taking you because?'

Lyla threw him a red-hot stare.

'Because blowing your beans within ten seconds inside me every night isn't free?'

'Keep it down, alright, alright.' He snatched her wrist and pulled her into his shack, firmly slamming the door behind them. He ruffled his hair frantically, exhaling deeply to ward off panic.

Tim threw himself onto his makeshift sofa, flicked a cockroach off the armrest to the far side of the room, and drummed his fingers there in its place.

'Which town? You say the next town over, but that's at least four different towns depending on which way we follow a compass. If you've even *got* a compass. None of them are exactly close.'

'I don't know, and I'm not asking Gregory. I want this over quick, *without* the entire town knowing.' Lyla said, sotto voce.

'The nearest I can think of is run out of that old *Holiday Inn*. It's not much of a town, really, barely a town at all. But I can't imagine Gregory's been much further than that. I could walk you down there. It'd take five days, maybe three without incident.'

An escort for the escort. The irony was not lost on her. Tim left momentarily to pull on a t-shirt and jeans, Lyla settling on the sofa in his place. When he returned, the pair of them stared pensively at the cockroach in the corner on its back, desperately trying to right itself. It was starting to look like a tasty snack too, but neither of them dared to say it.

‘Unless.’ Tim launched himself up and headed outside, Lyla running after him into the night. Next to Tim’s struggling farm was a large weather-beaten shed, and Lyla watched on quizzically as he heaved the rusted door open. Tim ripped away a blue tarpaulin to reveal a machine, painted in faded red and black, with a seat and steering wheel in the centre.

‘What’s that?’

‘I think it was used for cutting grass, back in before-times. It doesn’t need fuel, I tried stealing some for the generator last year and it doesn’t have a tank. I figured it must be electric, and it is. It’s been a bit of a pet project, but I haven’t managed to get it to go very far. . . Maybe tonight is it’s time to shine?’

‘You’re going take me there on a ride-on lawnmower?’

‘How can you be picky? Get on the bloody thing, I’ll start it up and push it out. We’ll be lucky if it has any juice. If it doesn’t work then, well, you’ll need to do up those laces.’

Indignantly she got on one knee and tied her shoes. Tim turned the key repeatedly, grunting curses under his breath and began giving the lawnmower some percussive maintenance when it didn’t respond. As he tried the key one more time and gave it a defeated kick, it rumbled into life, blades chopping menacingly towards Lyla. She leapt her feet and swung a leg over the seat. It chugged along slowly enough that Tim had time to strap a water canister and a sack of sunflower seeds to the back, finally jumping on behind Lyla. It wheezed under their combined weight, and as they slowly and noisily rode out of town, leaving a fully awakened and annoyed Dusttown in their wake.

A cracked road led the way, and after a quick squabble at a junction whether to go left or right, the pair put a few miles behind them by the time dawn broke. However only a man like Tim would

have believed the lawnmower would be a suitable vehicle for a trip of several days, and it coughed and spluttered to a stop before mid-morning.

‘Great,’ Tim mumbled.

He kicked it, called it a motherfucker, and took the water cannister onto his shoulders.

‘What a child,’ Lyla muttered, slinging the sunflower seed sack onto her back.

As they continued to walk, rolling countryside began to morph into a barren and arid landscape as hot as an Indian summer. They spoke little, Tim hot, angry, wishing he wasn’t escorting Lyla to destination unknown, and Lyla hot, angry, and wishing she wasn’t pregnant. They saw precious few other people, but all of them looked shifty, gawked at the sweaty pair, trying to gauge where they were going, and if it was worth robbing them at gunpoint/rusty-knife-point. They started to take more rural routes through dead fields, corn and plants little more than dust and ash

It was starting to get dark, and not wanting to risk getting their heads stoved in for some sunflower seeds and barely a day and a half’s water, they decided to seek shelter in the least kicked-in shop. A leather goods store looked pristine, windows still intact, until Tim put a rock through the shop front, pushed out the fragments of safety glass, and ushered Lyla inside. Once inside the store, they spied a famous logo on all the bags, belts, and clothes contained within. Nobody wanted to loot luxury goods when you might happen upon a reasonably edible tin of bread elsewhere. At least no chancers would bother them here.

‘Take it they left this behind. Do you reckon these would be collectibles or antiques up there?’ said Tim, turning over a sleek black holdall in his hands.

‘Yep, left behind, just like us.’ Lyla didn’t want to think about it too much, feeling a brief wave of hot anger, squeezing a wallet like a stress ball with a price tag of over a thousand pounds.

‘This’d be junk to them. They probably have even more frivolous brands now. After, what, about a decade and a half? I think this would be vintage, if it were old times.’

‘You have whatever you want in the whole store, honey, don’t say I don’t spoil you.’

Lyla laughed, mostly out of pity.

‘Do you think they ever think about us?’

‘I don’t think they even know there’s anybody left now.’

‘What do you think it’s like up there, in Iceland?’

‘Is talking about this doing you any favours? We are where we are, and things aren’t going to change getting all dreamy. I’m still going to be growing botched, science experiment plants and you’ll still be chugging dick for money. They aren’t thinking of us, don’t think about them, that’s just how things are.’

If the lawnmower had still been working, she’d have thrown him in front of the blades for that comment, but annoyingly he was right.

‘Could’ve been your mum if she was still alive.’ Her words dripped venom as she huffily threw a makeshift mattress out of quilted handbags and a cashmere coat for a duvet. Although her words took him aback, he couldn’t be angry at her for long. She was still here to suffer, his mum wasn’t. They both had a blunt, horrible point, and they both knew it.

Tim let out an elongated sigh and helped her set up.

‘Alright. I’m sorry, Lyla. Tell me about the beforetimes.’

‘They were shit, what little I remember of them, being a kid and everything. People got stabbed so people could steal their shitty expensive coats and bags like this, and... Me? I was a dancer,

but who needs a dancer in the apocalypse, all people want now is drugs and sex.'

'I'm sorry,' he repeated, but she felt it had a different meaning, similar to when he had said it at her bedside, but deeper.

'It's alright Tim, you didn't build this world, you just live in it.'

They climbed inside the jumble of luxury fabrics and huddled for warmth as the temperature began to plummet. It was the first time the two had had skin-on-skin contact and still been talking.

'You're sure you want to do this?' Tim asked. Everything had felt so slap-dash that he had no idea if she had given her decision much thought.

'See the abortionist, you mean?'

'Yeah. Not exactly a lot of opioid painkillers around here, and you know, rusty forceps...' He mimed them with his fingers and made two clicking noises, immediately realising his insensitivity and dropped his face and hand.

'Tim, you know how nurturing those tomatoes is quite hard?'

'Yeah?'

'Imagine doing that with a mini-Tim... Or heaven forbid, a mini Gregory, or a mini Ethan, or anyone else in Dusttown.'

Tim pulled a face.

'Exactly. Life's hard enough already. Where would I get time to see to baby's needs in between everyone else's? I can't even bear to think about what it would be like if I took this thing to term, and started to show, and feeling the pressure of a man's body on it. And birthing it surrounded by every idiot in town... Every day would be miserable, more miserable than things are already. I couldn't create a life just for them to inherit *this*. I already wake up every day wishing I wasn't who I was, why would I want to gift that to someone else?'

‘I mean, I wouldn’t mind one day, but... Right now...’ He was getting flustered, but couldn’t tear off back to his shack this time, ‘forget it.’

‘Would you really want a child here to suffer? For your own reasons? Now or ever? You can barely cope with vegetables.’

‘I said forget it.’ He pushed a bit harder, but it only caused her to smile.

He sighed deeply.

‘Alright, maybe you’re right. I don’t think I could hack it, nor would I want to. I wouldn’t even have mum to help out...’ Pain flashed over his face and he shook his head, as if scratching out the thought, ‘I wouldn’t even know if it’s mine, would I?’

‘If it came out in a cloud of leather flakes swearing about tomatoes, we’d be pretty sure.’

He laughed, but it didn’t last. Ultimately, rusty forceps and no painkillers would be far less pain than having the child.

In the morning, same as always, they didn’t wake to noise, or to the tune of their body clocks, they woke because of the burning, relentless heat. Their makeshift nest had already been pushed far away from them while they were still sleeping as the temperature began to rise. Tim chose to take one of the holdalls with him, as the more water they drank, the lighter the cannister became, but it became no less awkward. They made it maybe half a mile before a rumbling started from behind them, faint at first, but it quickly grew loud enough for them to both turn and look, wondering if the electric lawnmower was back to haunt them. It was no electric lawnmower. It was a fuel-guzzling mammoth of a motorbike, and it was bombing it straight for them. Lyla and Tim split just as the bike caught up with them, riding it a furious Gregory, Tim diving and weaving as it slowed down to match his pitiful run and tried

to knock him off his feet. The front wheel clipped the back of Tim's shoe and he faceplanted into the ground, Lyla standing for a moment, weighing up if she'd have a better chance of surviving by helping him, or running away. It was enough time for Gregory to clamber off the motorbike and grab her. He was normally scary enough – what with being the closest thing Dusttown had to law enforcement, and a solid, rotund body – but he had thunder on his face that would have made the devil run, and all she could do in his grasp was freeze.

'What are you doing you silly bastard?' Tim said, still writhing around, his leg in the air as he clutched his mangled foot.

'Here to ask you the same question. Are you out of your mind? Was that escape meant to be incognito? You can't just abscond with the last bit of pussy in town.'

'If that's what I got referred to as all the time I'd have split town ages ago. Just fuck off Greg, we'll be back, we've got a reason for this little road trip.'

Lyla felt herself go cold, imagining a return to Dusttown, sore and broke, but being duty-bound to get pounded ten times in the same night. Going back was feeling like less and less of an option with every mile she put between herself and the place.

'I'm not an idiot, I know exactly where you're going and why. You're wasting your time. Just get on the bike and let's get her back to town.'

'Get fucked Greg, I'm not having a baby in Dusttown. Nobody would be able to feed it.' Lyla finally found her voice as she broke free of Greg's grasp, immediately moving to help Tim to his feet.

'Tim, surely you see this is insanity, there's logic in keeping a child.'

'I can see what you're thinking and I'm not even going to go there,' Tim said, clutching Lyla's arm to steady himself.

These vague statements left Lyla to think the worst. Was it for some kind of fetish fuck once she was further along? Hell, did they want to *eat* the new-born? Then the penny dropped.

'You want another girl,' It came out as a gasp, and the two men looked at her, slightly surprised it had taken her so long, 'but what if it was a...,' she shook her head again and kept shaking, refusing to entertain the idea of birthing the thing, and in her rage charged at Greg and knocked him off his feet.

Tim and Lyla shared a wordless look that laid out an intricate plan.

'Tim, fucking grab her!'

For a moment Tim paused, weighing up his split-second plan with Lyla, and the demands of Dusttown's self-appointed leader. He gritted his teeth and went to his bag.

'Sorry Greg,' Tim feverishly loaded the shotgun and scrambled to point it at Greg, firing just as he rolled onto his back. It was a hit, but he would survive.

'Shoot him again!' Lyla cried, heaving the motorbike off the ground to see if Greg had any sizeable blunt objects to re-purpose.

'That was it, no more bullets.'

In-between agonised, gargling groans, Greg produced something close to a laugh. He began to get to his feet, so Lyla abandoned the bike and grabbed the holdall from off the ground and swung it up with a perfect pirouette into Greg's torso, knocking him down onto his backside. Tim seized the opportunity and jumped on top of him, straddling him to choke him with his bare hands. He wriggled and writhed beneath Tim.

'Jesus this is taking ages, he's still alive. Any ideas?' grunted Tim, having seen too many old movies where a person dies a femtosecond after someone grabs their throat, was unimpressed

with Greg's enthusiasm for life. Lost at what to do, and to Tim's dismay, Lyla began to run.

'Fuck you Lyla!' He could not mask the betrayal in his voice as Lyla pegged it down the street, but he had to commit to killing Greg now. It was a bit too late to stop considering he'd blown a hole in his body, but his arms were starting to tire, and Greg managed to occasionally whoop in a breath as Tim's strength began to wane. Greg lurched painfully and as Tim looked up to see why, Lyla had managed to drive a shard of glass into Greg's eye. It seemed to put a stop to his wriggling, and he was able to choke the life out of him a lot easier.

They both stood and wordlessly watched Greg, as if he might twitch, or cough, or show any sign of life. They didn't know what unnerved them more, the fact they'd just killed him or the fact he might suddenly spring back to life again. They didn't stick around to find out.

With the remaining petrol in the motorbike, the miles flew by, but it wasn't to last. With what remained of the water cannister -after using it for blunt force trauma- the last day and a half of walking seemed like suicide, the couple fighting blisters and delirium as a green sign melted onto the horizon. The letters making up *Holiday Inn* had been jumbled to christen the hotel-cum-town 'Hyaloid.'

'Fuck, we're here. We did it!' Lyla threw up a hand for a high-five, but Tim had one thing on his mind.

'Where's the bar?'

Lyla scrubbed her forehead in case it read 'tour guide,' (not that Tim would have understood why) but Tim probably had a point, as most of the town would congregate there. Right outside the hotel's front steps was a lorry with a faded but still happy-looking dog printed up the side. The rear of the lorry had already been rolled

up, and inside was a mountain of dog biscuits. Lyla reached into an open bag and nibbled on one, shaped like a little red bone. She dipped her shoulders as she chewed, face drawn.

'They're alright. Better than sunflower seeds.'

There were enough biscuits to keep a small hamlet going for a good month, maybe more. At least food was something they didn't have to worry about while they were here, the only thing they had to conquer was the townsfolk allowing them to stay. The pair pushed through solid doors onto what would have once been the hotel's lobby, the concierge desk now a rudimentary bar, stocked with crudely distilled vodka and moonshine in jam jars. A wispy grey head looked up from the bar, reaching down to reveal a crowbar.

'Oh my God it's a woman,' Lyla gasped, causing the crowbar to waver in the bartender's hand for a second, confusion in their eyes.

'Doesn't make me any easier to steal from.' She readjusted the crowbar and beckoned the pair over. She had a faded polo shirt on, and just visible behind the crowbar she clutched was a supermarket logo on the right, and an embroidered name tag reading *Anabelle* on the left. Tim raised both hands to affirm their harmlessness.

'Not what we're here for. We've come from Dusttown. On business,' Tim said, hoping to pacify the crowbar-wielding stranger.

'The sausage fest?' the woman asked.

'These days, yes, although not quite,' he shot a look at Lyla, and they took cautious steps towards the bar in unison, 'you got any whiskey?'

The woman tentatively put the crowbar back behind the bar, not dropping eye contact. Lyla and Tim scanned the room; not a single person there was disrupted by their presence, or the fact that the woman pulled out a crowbar.

‘We do. Name’s Annabel, if anything goes missing while you’re here, I’m taking a finger each in lieu of payment. Welcome to Hyaloid. The whiskey’s not cheap.’

Tim dropped his shoulders, deflated upon remembering he was a walking IOU. Lyla shook her head and slapped her purse on the table.

‘Give us the whole bottle. We’re here for the abortionist,’ Lyla said.

‘Huh?’ Annabel snatched the purse up and began counting the contents, before pushing a tumbler and a $\frac{3}{4}$ full whiskey bottle at Tim.

‘Abortionist. You know...’

‘Oh, honey,’ Annabel paused, leafing through the money and regarded Lyla. ‘are you sure?’

‘I’ve trekked for four days and almost been shot up the arse to get here. I am painfully sure.’ Lyla looked Annabel dead in the eyes to prove it.

Annabel flicked her eyes up and down over her one more time and disappeared into the luggage room. Tim flicked his eyes over the other silent bar patrons, then back to Lyla, dropping low.

‘You... You *are* sure?’

‘Yeah. Even if we never go back to Dusttown there’s enough people eating dog biscuits here as it is. No way is there room for another mouth. I don’t want to do it to you either, Tim. The way you handled Greg- I don’t know, you’ve got more to give than looking after a baby.’

‘Yeah... Yeah... I suppose we both do.’ He gripped her hand, and they both stared with anticipation at the curtain, taking it in turns to swig from the whiskey.

As they waited, the pair could hear muffled talking that shifted to panicked murmuring. At one point, Annabel swore she heard a man speaking, saying ‘I won’t do it. I refuse to go out there.’

‘You will get out here right fucking now!’

Upon Lyla’s enraged outcry a man similar in age to Annabel sheepishly appeared in the doorway of the luggage room, clutching something bulky in both hands underneath his coat. He shrugged the coat off to reveal a small box with bellows.

‘Is that a . . . Oh fuck.’ Tim realised the grave mistake and it was as if everything went into slow motion. The older man’s cheeks burned bright red, his mouth moving into different shapes to start speaking but no words would come forward.

‘Tim, what the fuck is that?’

His mouth went completely dry, and with a gulp, he said the dreaded words.

‘That’s . . . That’s an accordion.’

CORINA DUMA

The Irredeemable Qualities of Mrs Florence Albion

The River Frome froze completely in late November, 1954. The local fishermen would usually set up their equipment outside The Old Granary early in the morning, but not today – and certainly not for a few weeks. There was no snow, but a brisk chill had set in. Townsfolk remained indoors, children being the only ones brave enough to scurry off towards the river with second-hand skates and knitted clothes.

I watched it all unfold from my estate on the hill. The sash windows on the second floor overlooking the riverbank provided the perfect nook for idle spying.

‘It’s your favourite morning pastime,’ Clarke would often muse whenever he’d find me next to that window. And he was right. Although, I’d say it’s grown into a routine, or a hobby, otherwise why would I bother pulling up a *chaise longue*? On days where I had nothing scheduled, I just left the damn thing there, along with a stack of magazines: a spare pack of *du Maurier*, the telephone from the piano room, and a pair of binoculars, all arranged in their place on the window ledge.

There’s nobody here during the weekends to dare disturb my setup. Clarke is more often than not away on business in Southampton – good riddance – and Greta, my Siamese cat, hisses at me and avoids eye contact. We’re just housemates until she improves her attitude. I’m not as bothered as I should be, as long as I have my time to unwind by my window. Lately, I’ve had more than plenty of time, especially since marrying Clarke; he goes away to work, he provides me an awfully comfortable life, he still does a good job of pretending to be enamoured with me, and I remain

here, with my ever-emptying schedule, a cat that loathes me, and the fading dream of becoming a concert pianist.

'I make enough money to support your foolish hobby, so you really don't need to strain yourself with paid recitals, Floss,' he said when I approached him with my idea of going back to work, 'besides, there's a perfectly good piano here. Play away!' He stormed out after that, instead of doing something he may've regretted. He simply didn't understand, and it made him angry. I don't want to make him angry, yet my mind finds a way of jumping back to that scene, and I can't help but think it would be so good to go back to the city, playing my music for the sort of people I'd like to impress.

Nearly every day is spent next to the window, slumped in my *chaise lounge*, and staring aimlessly out at the sky, whatever colour it might be. Sometimes I forget to blink and I emerge to my senses abruptly. I am reminded of myself each time I turn to face the door to the piano room, slightly ajar, to reveal the grand piano – or at least the front side and its matching chair. The music sheet has been gathering dust, along with the piano. I can tell the light filtering through the windows has yellowed the pages, too. Tiny flakes of dust lay on the surface of my music. I'd squint at it, as it taunts me with my idleness.

Enough. I light a cigarette and descend the stairs. I'm not entirely sure why, but perhaps there's something entertaining to do downstairs.

'There you are, Floss,' well, there's my husband. I hate it when he calls me that. He looked as though he had just stood up to make tea, just as I walked to the kitchen doorway, 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

'I had no idea you were up.'

‘I don’t like to sleep in. And I didn’t want to disturb your “hobby”, sweetheart.’ He chuckled. While his back was turned, I indulged in a sarcastic glare, then sat down and waited for him to hand me my cup of tea.

‘Lovely day, don’t you think?’ he said cheerfully.

‘Yes. Why? Do you have plans?’

‘I’m not working today, or at least I’m not expecting a call from the office,’ he drew out his words excessively, I hated the way he did that too. ‘I was thinking of going out hunting later, what do you think?’

He looked expectant and a little giddy with his own kindness. I just stared at him in my most charming manner and said, ‘That sounds like a good idea, will you be going on your own?’

‘Well, no, actually,’ he began, ‘I was going to suggest you come with me,’ he gushed, as though he’s never done a better deed in his life; kindness is dispensed as infrequently as charity with Clarke.

‘Well, alright,’ I said, ‘you’ll need to give me some time to change my clothes, and then I’ll join you.’ I smiled and lulled him in content. He stood up and walked around the table to kiss me on my head. I didn’t move, I expressed nothing; I wanted him to go into the next room and read his newspaper just as I knew he would.

It wasn’t long until I left the kitchen and made my way up the stairs. Momentarily, I stopped to look out of my beloved window, grabbing the binoculars to look for finer details. The children were still out and playing near the river, though now they made their way further afield towards the empty plains. Some were still skating, and it dawned on me that I should get on my outdoor suit. Perhaps even paint my nails a striking shade of red.

Yes, that’s exactly what I did. Once I was done, I checked myself in the bedroom mirror – just to make sure no part of my guise was

out of sorts; It is important to me that Clarke will always believe me to be sweet, sophisticated, and most importantly, harmless.

'I'm ready,' I called out as I was coming out onto the landing. My voice carried, echoing across the whole house. Clarke's newspaper rustled and hit the coffee table in response. I waited by the bottom of the staircase while he put on his shoes and gathered his things.

We walked down the driveway of our estate arm in arm, the perfect picture of young, married life. I made sure he looked at me an appropriate amount, and I also made sure to give him the attention he craved in public, meaning just enough to keep the neighbours from talking. Conversation was weak – in fact, we were bending over backwards searching for anything to pass our time walking to the field he described as, 'chock-full of game'.

Clarke walked slightly ahead, clearly more eager to have a go at shooting than I was to do nothing. We were crossing the river at the exact place I've become accustomed to watching. I looked out to the river and heard the playful, carefree voices of the children.

'Don't dawdle, Floss,' he yelled from the other side of the bridge, 'come on.' I jogged over to where he was with a smile and spun some half-baked, flighty thoughts about how the fishermen haven't been able to fish today, or yesterday, or the day before, in fact. He found it endearing.

'It's over here, see?' Clarke explained, 'Me and the boys have walked around this expanse and we have found most of our success in this area right here.'

'Am I here as a good luck charm?' I teased. He only looked back to confirm the joke was received and, on some level, understood. What a boring man, I often thought.

He got in the 'zone', and I figured clinging to him would only slow his progress, so I headed towards the river for a stroll. Then

it began to snow; I saw the sky fill with the hazy grey of ice, as snowflakes began to fall on my coat.

'Darling, look, it's snowing!' I shouted in Clarke's direction. 'Do you see it?'

I watched his figure in the distance for a response, but he didn't care. I shouted again, doing everything in my power to grab his attention until he finally turned around, but all he did was signal to me he wasn't listening. My gut was telling me he was angry, and so I finally had enough. I walked up the river thinking I'd only sulk for a while and head home alone and composed.

Until, just as I was emerging from a cluster of trees near the frozen river, I saw the struggling body of a child grappling with the icy crust of the lake, and without a beat to think for my own safety I ran towards the chaos with a sturdy-looking branch I yanked from a bush. Meanwhile, this small thing was writhing in the water, their friends only just having heard the noises from further away in the fields. It would take them a while to get to where I was, so I took my chance. I made my way onto the ice carefully and as quickly as I could, extended the branch out to the child.

'Come on, take it, and hold on as tight as you can,' I said, reaching as far as I could without endangering myself. I looked up briefly to see how close their friends were. They were close enough to see a kind stranger attempt to save the life of their unfortunate friend, yet far enough to not see the rage I felt contort the muscles in my face.

As the child's weak grip held to the stick I had extended, I pushed ever so slightly forward, shaking the child's grip off its lifeline. It looks like an accident. It's alright, remorse is easy enough to forge.

'Help! Somebody!' I screamed again, and again, and again. I began to sob convincingly as the drowning child's yellow matching hat and scarf began to fade into the depths of the river. I heard


Clarke's footsteps rush towards me as one of the children heading our way left the group, presumably to get their parents or other adults.

'We shouldn't have left him on his own, miss. Will we get into trouble?' Oh, it was a *him*, I'll remember that. The young lads looked horrified – whether it was because of their friend's death, or the assumed punishments they'd receive from their parents, I cannot say.

Clarke was not particularly helpful, of course; he never was very good with children. I assume it would take him years to understand that children are not comforted by legal help at half the price (with a free consultation and recommendation letter not going without saying). He left me to do all the talking when more people arrived at the scene of this terrible, terrible loss. Occasionally, he'd squeeze my shoulder in support while the neighbours clamoured around this side of the river. I'd prefer he didn't do that, but given the circumstance, I let it go unchallenged.



The townsfolk I had become accustomed to seeing from my window looked hideous up close – with or without the grief, or their battered hands clasped over their mouths in disbelief. The police, an ambulance, and a group of local workmen showed up fairly speedily in order to assess the damage – not forgetting the tricky retrieval of the poor boy from the bottom of the river. I didn't stick around to see his dire corpse on a stretcher. Instead, the police questioned me, decided I meant nothing but well, and gave me a blanket to drape around my coat. I wasn't even cold.

'I'd like to express to all of you, especially the little one's parents, how dreadfully sorry I am that I couldn't do any more for him. My thoughts are with you all, in particular his family,' I gave my speech as Clarke was urging me to go home, and lie down. I dabbed a dry eye with my sleeve as I began to move away, and the little boy's



mother burst into tears again, 'If you'd like, I'd very much like to host the wake for the boy. It's the least I could do.' Clarke said nothing, but he was in no position to refuse. The mother couldn't begin to speak but she nodded, all the while sobbing in a handkerchief. 'It'd be my pleasure, as always, to be of help,' I said.

Clarke's push towards taking our leave only became more pronounced, and so he edged me subtly onto the path towards home. We didn't speak, but that's not unusual. However, when we got indoors, away from the scene that had unfolded that late November in 1954, I turned to him and said, 'Now, darling, will you let me leave town for my recitals?'



Tornado Season

I spent the better part of my day outdoors on a long uphill walk to the coast, and afterwards, I read the entire *Architectural Digest* copy I had on my coffee table from the autumn of last year. That copy was particularly dull. I'd capped my coffee intake to just one cup in the morning. God, I want another one.

I want to see what it'll take for me to get a good night's rest tonight, without late-night distractions, or the extra coffee that I shouldn't have, or the help of Zopiclone. I'll be in bed by nine and hopefully asleep by ten. I'll be really straight-laced tonight – if the plan works. If it doesn't work, I'll just have to shrug it off and face the facts: I can't launch myself at the bed and fall asleep with my shoes on as I used to. Nowadays it takes preparation and perseverance.

It's sad, really.

*

I jogged back home from the coast at a steady pace in the late afternoon, slowing down a few times to a brisk walk. When I arrived home, I convinced myself I wasn't going to take a nap or kill the fatigue with coffee – as usual. I made dinner and then pottered about the house doing some irrelevant tasks. Then, when it was closer to bedtime, I changed the bedsheets, got a fresh set of pyjamas ready, and I even sprayed the room with an arbitrary scent that apparently 'aids in your sleep'. Maybe I am a little obsessed. Then, I took a bubble bath and prepared myself for the best night's sleep in years.

I got into bed and attempted winding down. I tried tuning out the world outside, I focused only on the darkness and stillness of the room, I even covered my eyes with my arm because my eyes weren't heavy enough, and maybe I needed more darkness.

I used to be able to have both a good night's sleep and strange dreams that I remembered in the morning; now it's either one or the other. I remember some of those dreams perfectly – in one particular dream I was wandering around Canada Water (for what reason I can't say) until I met up with a group of women I don't recognise. We went out for drinks in a nondescript venue to drink and take pictures. Then, out of nowhere, a girl named Tiffany I was in school with comes out of the crowd and asks us all, 'Why don't you come over to my parents' house?' Everyone agreed and started shuffling out of their seats.

As dreams often are, you don't remember the journey from one moment to the next, but as it turns out, this house she mentioned was really a manor on a tricky hill. If you're a positive person, you'd say it was *eclectic*. From the front of the house I saw the Isle of Wight, but from the back, where her mother was sitting on the patio (readjusting her wig) I saw pterodactyls darting across a scene of ancient temples. It's funny recounting it now, but at the time I was incredulous and confused.

Anyway, I left because even in my dreams I don't care about *that* Tiffany I went to school with. I went back to Canada Water where my closest friend waited for me. She's with a man with a van that is itching to get a move on, and she says to me, entirely irritated, 'there you are, you were going to help me move an hour ago! Where were you?'

I assume I apologised, or at least noticed her stress, because I began helping out. We moved nothing but potted plants and

hanging baskets – no furniture, no belongings – in the back of this van. The driver got in and sped off, leaving us behind. My friend was devastated, so I was running after the van, trying to catch it at a stoplight. But I woke up instead. Maybe I tired myself out chasing that vehicle.

Another dream I had made even littler sense than the last one. Sometimes it starts plausible and then slowly becomes improbable, but this one took the proverbial cake sooner than most. I was an actor playing an FBI agent with Keanu Reeves (and I know this because Keanu Reeves appeared when I was having lunch at secondary school with the people I usually tagged along with). I thought he was very charming and on more than one occasion, he referred to me as ‘co-star’. That was bizarre enough, but then somewhere along the line, I became an actual FBI agent.

I had to infiltrate a small, rundown place with a chain-link fence and a broken gate. I did this many times – in the same dream – with outcomes all differing from each other. One time I got shot by a stranger popping out of an underground bunker, then another man in a mac met me at the gate and we proceeded towards the bunker to investigate together. It carried on in that manner.

After that sequence, I remember watching myself walking down a Tuscan village at sundown. It was a ghost town by any standard; there were no passers-by, nobody on the coast or the beach, only stillness and the shadows cast by the setting sun. As I continue away on my aimless stroll through this model village, I pass a coffee shop with its doors flung open. There’s not a soul around, so naturally this piques my interest. I peer inside and Big Dave, the pub owner that fired me when I was eighteen, was standing by a coffee machine with a mate, eager to get some business. He spots me and says, ‘Hi! Do you want to buy a coffee?’ really enthusiastically. This was

uncanny for two reasons, one because he didn't serve coffee (nor did he own a coffee machine), and two, because Big Dave would never be at home in a Tuscan village, let alone in a coffee shop. I took a step back from this establishment and gave Big Dave the side-eye before I walked out of the coffee shop and up a medieval tower that sprung out of the pavement. Then I woke up.

*

At the moment I'm still lying in bed waiting to nod off, but I'm thinking of these old dreams I've had and where the jumbled combinations that made them up came from. I'm thinking the FBI agent part came from watching *Twin Peaks*, but I'll never know for sure. A good example of that is Canada Water; I've never lived in Canada Water, but I knew it was Canada Water. I should not try to make sense of something that isn't supposed to have any, but I'm curious. Was my mind's interpretation of an encounter with Keanu Reeves even remotely realistic? It could've been if we weren't in my old secondary school, I think. After that dream I woke up ecstatic to have met him – how does that work? On a different occasion, I woke up upset after finding an abandoned cat with a dent in its nose. Nobody would help me with him, and obviously, when I woke up he wasn't going to be there.

I still can't sleep, but now it seems that whatever tiredness I had felt has disappeared. Being awake for so long in the darkness can play tricks on your mind and accelerate bad thoughts, like when you dangle an arm or a foot over the edge of the bed and the more you leave the limb there, the more you think something will drag you away. The thoughts pile up in my head until I can't make them at all rational. And they are loud; some are frustrated

I'm not sleeping, others echo my worries, and others haunt me with petty things to find the answers for: Why is it called coronation chicken? If I google that headache I had two weeks ago, what are the chances it will come up with a brain aneurysm? What would a chair look like if your knees bent the other way? If I reach for my phone and look it up right now... I won't.

I'm scoping the room. On the back of the chair facing my vanity, I see a face forming in the creases of my dressing gown. Further away, in the darkest corner of the room, there is no discernible characteristic to be noticed, yet my mind tricks me into believing that – for a split second – a person is crouched clutching their legs in fear. They stare at me with wide, damp eyes willing me to stay at a distance.

I need to clear these thoughts out of my mind.

I turned my attention to the aertex ceiling. The textured pattern that seemed to carry on forever – in the darkening horizon of my bedroom – managed to keep me grounded with the sparse moonlit segments alone. The paint swirled and swished around above, like water. The more I stared into the depths of the grooves, the more I projected what I wanted to see. Cold, harsh ocean. Ever-changing, ebbing for eternity without compromise or exceptions. The patterns above make more sense when the waves subside, and I can make out paintings reminiscent of Matisse.

Even in the darkness, everything feels bluer after the soothing waves of the above. The room is blue, but when it's so late who can tell? I'm thinking about the colour of my walls and the way the moonlight filters through the corners of the curtains. That mix enhanced this particular shade of blue – *Tornado Season*, I think it's called – or something else equally as weird and a little spooky. We're getting to the deep end of the night and the muddy deep-water

blue of this *Tornado Season* paint appears to have the room swirling into unease.

I turn over to face the other side and close my eyes to drown my imagination. I stay like that for long enough to call it a fair try, my eyelids twitching from being closed without needing sleep. I turn again – this time back to the way I was before. I haven't given it much thought before, but right now I've become more aware of the muffled party noises coming from outside, unfinished parts of guest's conversations. A hotchpotch of voices, emotional states, and laughter.

I peeled the cover off slightly and got out of bed to walk to the window. At the current time, I'd be hard-pressed to find a single soul still out of bed – especially around these parts – yet there's a garden party in full swing right next door. I opened the window, leant out and shouted.

'Hey, keep it down, will you? I'm trying to catch an early night!' It didn't feel good. I felt my head was fit to explode, and I couldn't keep my hands from shaking.

A man came out from under an umbrella and shouted back.

'Up yours, blondie, we're celebrating my son's birthday!' I was in awe at his uncouth response, but also couldn't believe that I had just done that without giving it a second thought, but that was the only line I was going to cross. No more encouraging this screaming contest to continue past that brief exchange, so I promptly shut the window with a slam that caused a tremor to pass through the house.

I was about to get back into bed and exercise not being a quitter when I heard a familiar clattering of pans echo up the stairs. Then, I heard the voice of my grandmother come from downstairs.

'Louisa? Louisa, darling, can you come downstairs, please? It's important.'

I crossed the room from the window and to the door of my bedroom. I could still hear my grandmother's jangling of pans, so I went downstairs.

'Yes, Nanna? What is it, do you need help?' as I walked to the kitchen. She didn't reply, but I heard her rummaging in the kitchen some more. I called out her name as I opened the door to the kitchen.

'There you are, dear,' she said turning around and walking towards me for a hug. I could smell her *Lily of the Valley* perfume in the embrace. Then, she put one arm on my shoulder, looked me in the eye the way she always did for heightened dramatic effect, and said, 'Has your mother prepared the watermelons?'

I wasn't sure how to respond, but the most logical answer seemed to be, '... No, Nanna. She hasn't mentioned anything about the watermelons.' Nanna shook her head disappointed for a second, then in her chipper way brushed it off with:

'Oh well, we couldn't rely on her anyway. Mary is here to help us with the picnic.'

'Mary? Where? She didn't say she was coming!' I hurried around the ground floor repeating, 'Mary, Mary!' until I found her sitting in the corner of the settee scrolling on her phone.

'And you couldn't even say "hello?"' I said to her. She looked a little annoyed I had disturbed her, but then she replied with:

'Do you like my new glasses?'

'Very nice,' I said.

'Do you want to try them on?'

'Fine, I will.'

She handed me her glasses, warning me not to smudge them as I put them on. I walked over to the nearest mirror and looked at my reflection. The face of an old man with thinning hair and deep-set wrinkles stared back at me.

‘They don’t suit me, I look like Jean-Paul Sartre,’ I said to Mary. I then took the reading glasses off and handed them back to her.

‘Suit yourself. I thought they looked better on me anyway,’ she said, ‘they complement my face shape more.’

From all the years I had known Mary, I knew it was best to leave her be. Don’t provoke her, don’t challenge her to think differently, and absolutely don’t criticise; she’ll turn red and either start crying or slap you. She wasn’t a hazard right now, although I was aware that Nanna had wandered away.

I briefly checked in the kitchen to see if Nanna was there. She wasn’t, so then I meandered about, in case we were missing each other by going into the rooms where we’ve already been. At that point it occurred to me that I hadn’t checked either the garden or upstairs.

I traced my steps through the house and towards the patio outback. Nothing was out of place or out of the ordinary, but when I opened the door, the outside was saturated with a bright light that left almost no shadows. Nanna wasn’t in the garden, but I stood there for some time trying to make sense of the lights. I was stuck on this for a significant period mainly because I couldn’t understand what in the world was cluttering my garden.

Birthday candles? *Large* birthday candles? That can’t be it, but however I try to explain it there’s still at least a dozen or more birthday candles as big as my house topping my garden.

My eyes start to twitch and grow sensitive to the light.

I’m back in my room, with the duvet up to my nose and sunshine so bright it could set fires in your retinas. I spent the first moments of the morning piecing together what I now know to have been a dream. Weird.

Well, there goes another one for the list.

MEAL FOR ONE

Herbert Morose, a man I once saw and named in a different scenario to this, has been transported through the power of words, and words alone, to the alternate existence you are experiencing right now. While he himself isn't the most remarkable of characters on the exterior (you might choose to pity him as he very mournfully microwaves another ready meal to the sound of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata), on the inside he manages a string quartet of creativity, he rides wild horses and takes pleasure in throwing rocks at his neighbour's window like he used to in the summer of '76.

It felt like only yesterday that he rode a rickety train to Gordon Way, his dead mother's residence on the Isle of Man. Maybe it was yesterday. Mister Morose, in all his aged wisdom and white-collar experience, reflects on his journey of not so long ago – meaning yesterday or even last week, time isn't an object Herbert likes to play with. He remained seated in the third carriage on the right-hand side. He is yet to finish the small cup of watery instant coffee he bought from a gas station hill-billy – named Billy Hill – for the extortionate price of £3.99.

Such is the way of the world.

His mind wanders, like most of our minds would when we must suffer watching the 99th cow in a field pass us by. There was a time, a vague and most likely manufactured time, when he remembers being a younger Mister Morose, attempting to colour in an entire A4 page in black biro. At some point in that ludicrous narrative, his mind went blank, sort of like in a trance state, for over half an hour while he carried on marking the page fully. He was proud of his accomplishment and impressed with his ability to

undertake mindless, repetitive activities, so he decided to become a businessman.

Perhaps somewhere between the page and the biro Herbert remembered his childhood sweetheart, Judy Sullen, as a 'bleakly romantic stick insect' that would put ketchup on her pasta and backcomb her ponytail in a sad attempt at coolness. Mister Morose thinks about Judy very fondly. He wonders if the onsets of lung cancer have caught up with her since the last time he saw her. He hopes not. *The Isle of Man, you say*. Back to the A4 page filled with biro that does not resemble writing in the traditional sense: The painful slap of his mother's hand after showing her the young mister Morose's self-proclaimed achievement jolts him awake and the memory of her disappointment dropped on him like the ninety-nine cows in a field. His brow furrows as he takes himself out of the flashback in the flashback in a flashback.

The microwave beeped at the end of its task.

KAYLEIGH JAMES

Owed

The streets were cold and dark. It was quiet; the whisper of the wind could be heard calling. Candles were snuffed; breath was held, and children were pulled close to their mothers' chests. A figure appeared, veiled in shadows, his frame tall and wide. Moving, gliding, back and forth, from home to home. He tapped each door in turn. TAP TAP TAP. Three hollow beats on each door, one for each gold coin promised, that had then been denied. He had taken their plague, and they had laughed at his request, placing the gold back in their coffers. He was only one man, they had said, what could he do? He had shown them, shown them all. For every rat he had taken, he had taken a child in turn. They still owed him. June 26th came every year; he followed closely. TAP TAP TAP. Children wept and mothers shushed. If he heard, then they would be lost. Hamelin watched and waited for the sun; the birth of the new day gave them another year. TAP TAP TAP. A baby's wail broke the silence. The figure turned and flew towards the sound. His black rags whipped around him as he stopped at a door. The smell of death permeated in every home, coming in through the cracks, in doors, and down chimneys. A finger stretched out and the touched the door, drawing down over the bumps and grooves in the wood. TAP TAP TAP. The crying stopped.

The Bad One

You are the bad one, the kid full of darkness. It doesn't matter how many times you say you aren't; you are. You take a step forward until your toes curl over the edge (of?). You can't change your nature; that is who you are. Naked in the wind, it tickles over your skin; your flesh responds as though it is a siren calling. The dance of the zephyr weaves through your hair, its happiness mocking you. You look down at your hands, at the gun in one and the hole in the other. It looks like the stigmata has caught up with you and has found you wanting. There are no heroes here to save you. Bringing the gun to your head; resting the barrel on your temple, kissing you like a lover's tender lips; you pull the trigger. You think you are blind, but it is only the light of the bullet ripping through your understanding; it leaves you whole as it departs. The trigger won't change the truth; there can never be truth in the trigger. You lean forward, forward into the sky. Around, and around you spin, falling up and falling down but never hitting. Lost, until you wake.

Friend

For Sam.

I had this friend once when I was small and full of joy. She was the best of all my friends, though I don't know if I told her. She would come and play make believe, as I didn't have toys when I was little, just old computers and doorknobs. She was always happiest at my home, with my hard drives, mother boards and porcelain. We would play for hours. I don't remember if we ever spoke, but called each-other on the phone, every night for 59 minutes, or until someone needed to use the internet. I still remember her number, 01814882465, I don't remember speaking, we sang though, Michael Jackson over and over. She let her mother hear me sing one time. If I didn't speak to her for a week, it felt like a month.

We went to the same primary school, and when I left, she came to my new school. I would go down the hill to her house sometimes. Her room had a bookcase full of fantastic worlds that filled me with elves, dwarves, and everything nice. She had so many toys, each with their own place. I didn't go there as much as she came to mine. Her house was a sad house, with a mother that wasn't a mum. I was scared of her mother. I still am. She was mean then and as an adult, I see her with older eyes, truly an evil and black spirit.

My friend came to school one day, she wouldn't take her hood down. I didn't notice, but Tania did, she was the bully, she had black spirit too. I remember her ripping my friends hood down and seeing her hair had been cut off. She had had golden hair that blazed in the sun. Her mother the Dahlia, I knew the evil my friend had to go back to, but I didn't have the words to help. I was too young; my

friend was growing up faster than me. She began to look at boys while I was over the moon at getting my first Barbie.

We grew apart, I didn't even notice it happen. She came around less and less but was angrier every time I saw her. We are older now; we see things that we didn't see before. Some of the horrors of her house are seared into my brain, whereas she has wiped them completely from her own. She knows what happened but doesn't remember. My old friend left me at 14.

J.T. MULHOLLAND

23.01 11:50am

CHAPTER ONE: BLUEJAY

It is Thursday the 23rd of January. At 11:50 a.m., fifty-one people will die, and I have been told to save one. I was told to wait near the Greenwich Market where, in twenty-five minutes, fifty-one people will die. I don't like the area, the air smells like petrol; whenever I breathe, I can taste smoke and coal. I want to spit; I want to wash my mouth out. Yet, I have a job to do. Buses are stopping and starting, the 286 stops in front of the DLR station whilst the I29 is trying to make its way past; the traffic in Greenwich is bad and at 11:50 a.m. it will halt. Some may skid, others will crash. In a standstill of cars, the 386 bus will come speeding down and disrupt the chaos of non-moving traffic. Five drivers and three passengers will sustain injuries. Two of the drivers will be hospitalised, thirty-eight-year-old Miles Whittaker and twenty-seven-year-old Juliet Daniels. Miles will live. For the next thirty-one years he will live with survivors' guilt before dying from cardiac arrest. In twenty-five minutes, Juliet will sustain significant internal bleeding. In thirty minutes, many ambulances will arrive, one will collect Juliet. In an hour and fifteen minutes she will die on an operating table as it will not be possible to stop the internal bleeding. She will leave behind a three-year-old daughter named Charlotte.

It is now 11:30 a.m. and a large young man passes me by, he takes a look at me. His name is Warren Collins, and he compliments my blue velvet suit. He is eating a chicken burger, possibly from the McDonalds by the DLR station. A drop of mayonnaise impacts his shirt as he takes a large bite out of the burger. At 11:45 a.m. upon finishing his burger, Warren will still be peckish and

will enter the Greenwich Market and head towards the hot dog vendor. In five minutes, he will be dead. It is now 11:40 a.m. and I get a few glances from people passing by. Some stare whilst others smile awkwardly. I was told to be inconspicuous, but I like velvet suits. I tell myself I wear them to remind my superiors that they don't own me, but in truth I wear them because I feel like it. It is now 11:41 a.m. and a woman with a pram enters the market. Her name is Lauren Fletcher, she is twenty-nine years old. Her son is Tony, he is two and a half. The last nine minutes of their lives will be spent in the market. I don't feel good, I hate it here. I shouldn't have agreed to do this, but it's too late to back out now. I was told that I would know when she arrived, that I would sense her.

It is now 11:49 a.m. and I feel a shudder, like someone patting me on the shoulder. She's here. Entering the Greenwich Market is a twenty-five-year-old woman. Her name is Lavender Roth, she's six months and three weeks pregnant and she has fifty-eight seconds to live. I sprint across the busy road, going as fast as this form allows me. I cease to acknowledge the world around me as I race to find her, Lavender has thirty-nine seconds left. As I rush towards the market, suddenly I trip on the stepped entrance. This body is bruised and winded, my chest feels warm as it slowly starts to sting. I've got to get up, Lavender has twenty-six seconds left. I pick myself up; it hurts, but I have to fight through it, I must get to Lavender. I rush into the market. But she's nowhere to be seen. Lavender has twelve seconds left. I look around the market frantically. There are too many people. So many heads, so many brains. Too many bags of flesh... There. Walking towards the second-hand book stand, Lavender has eight seconds left. I sprint towards her, six seconds left. Five, four, three, two... I grab her wrist. I grab the amulet from my pocket... one.

CHAPTER TWO: LAVENDER

It's Thursday, the 23rd of January. At 11:50 a.m. Fifty-one people died. I should have been amongst them but something, someone higher and more powerful saw value in my survival. My life changed that day for I learnt the truth about existence. I saw horror. In the Greenwich Marketplace someone grabs my wrist, everything goes white.

It is the 17th of July at 10:22 a.m. Doctor Harper comes back with the results; she confirms that I am pregnant. It is the 3rd of July, after a week of sickness I bought a pregnancy test. It states that I am pregnant. What's happening? A moment ago, I was in the Greenwich Market, I spied a second-hand bookstand. Now I am eight years old and it is Christmas day. Mum gives me a stuffed doll; it is an angel in a velvet blue dress. Now it is the 19th of July. It's 13:28 p.m. and I am in my parents living room. After putting it off for two days, I finally tell my parents that I am pregnant. They are silent. Have I died? All I can see is a white void.

I am now 12 years old; Mum and I are at church. Our pastor give is giving a sermon about the sins of premarital sex. I am seated near a stained-glass window; it depicts an angel draped in blue. Now I am nineteen years old, I have left a night club with my friends Wynona and Christine. We are laughing and singing, it's the first time I've ever been drunk. I am now eight years old again, it is the 18th of December. Dad takes me to a Santa's grotto, only this Santa has long white hair and a blue suit. I see Mum's face; she's giving me *that* look. That look that screams disappointed, that look that whispers failure.

It is the 25th of June, I am in a nightclub. It is 11:50 p.m. I meet someone sitting at the bar, they are beautiful, but I can only



remember a blurred version of their silhouette; or rather fragments of them. Their hair was long, like silky white ribbons. Their skin was unearthly; it was white like snow and as I caressed their cheek, I could have sworn that they were made out of marble. They bought me a drink, upon passing the cold, wet glass, our hands touched. It is the 20th of July; I am sitting alone in my flat. I have tried phoning my mother five times, but she hasn't picked up. In my arms I am clutching my blue toy angel; floods of tears pour out of my eyes in desperation.

It is Thursday, the 23rd of January. I decide to go down to Greenwich for a day out. I've always liked Greenwich. Beautiful area, great museums, and lovely restaurants. It is now the 23rd of January, last year. I am sitting in the Cutty Sark restaurant with some coffee, a pale person in a blue suit is sitting on the table across me. 11:49 a.m. January the 23rd of this year. I am in the Greenwich Market, browsing its food and jewellery stands. Suddenly I spot a second-hand book stand. I love second-hand books, they come with history and beautifully illustrated covers. One cover catches my eye, it depicts a planet rising the water underneath a star filled sky. The book is called *The Blue Angel*, written by Jayston Blue. As I walk towards the stand, someone grabs my hand.

CHAPTER THREE: THE DOMAIN

Lavender awoke to find that she had been sleeping upright. As she tried to look around, she gasped. 'What's happened? Where... I can't see, I can't see!' Everything was a blur to her, like wax smudged on a camera lens.

'Am I blind? Oh God... I'm blind.' She thought to herself as she rubbed her eyes. Suddenly her sight became clear as everything



went back into focus. When her sight returned, Lavender trembled then gasped.

'I'm dead, aren't I? A— am I dead?' She thought to herself, then she closed her eyes.

'This has to be dream, it's got to be.' Upon opening them again, she covered her mouth. Surrounding her was a dark green space populated by silver, shimmering galaxies. They were like snowflakes; some were like diamonds with long spiked limbs. Others were like a hexagon within a hexagon within a hexagon ad-nauseum. For Lavender, it was like standing upon the night sky whilst being enclosed by it.

'My baby!' Lavender gasped. Immediately she clutched her stomach, she breathed a sigh of relief. Her bump was still there. As Lavender took in her surroundings, veins began to pulse. Her eye lids began to twitch, her body began to tremble as her breathing grew quicker.

'I—I can't be. . . we're n—not dead.' Lavender whispered to herself as her voice slowly began to break.

'You're not dead Lavender. You and your child are safe here,' a voice said to Lavender. Lavender jumped then shuddered. 'And I was told green was supposed to be a calming colour. . .' the voice sighed. 'Perhaps a mid-tone blue instead.' The sky changed to suit the voice's suggestion.

Lavender took a deep breath and turned around. Her body was shaking as her eyes started to moisten. Standing parallel to her was a tall, slender figure dressed in a velvet blue suit. Their hair was bleach blond, long and silky. It was a mop of ribbons. Their skin was smooth and snow-white. There wasn't any blemishing nor imperfections. Their face was shaped like a long, pointed heart. Their nose was sharp like a falcon's beak and their eyes were large

and yellow, like that of a wildcat. Lavender gulped, then she took in a deep breath. Slowly, she walked towards the perplexing figure. They stood there and watched her, waited for her.

‘W—who. . . who are you?’ Lavender asked the figure as she crept closer towards them.

‘You wouldn’t be able to pronounce it, no mortal can,’ said the figure. They looked at her and smiled. ‘But you can call me. . . Bluejay.’ They paused and moved closer to Lavender. ‘Does my form alarm you?’ Bluejay enquired.

‘No,’ snapped Lavender, shaking her head. Bluejay tilted their head to the right, raising an eyebrow. Then Bluejay tilted their head to the left.

‘You’re avoiding something,’ Bluejay stated. Lavender stared at Bluejay. She took a deep breath and clenched her fists, then opened them.

‘Where am I? Why am I here?’ Bluejay tilted their head back into position. They stared at Lavender for a moment, their eyes fixed on her. Lavender stepped back, trembling a little. Then Bluejay blinked and smiled.

‘Me! You’re inside me.’

Lavender looked down at her feet, then she looked up. She stared at one of the snowflake-looking galaxies. Then she looked at Bluejay.

‘You?’ She said. ‘How can I be inside of you? I mean, how can *you* be inside of yourself?’ Bluejay looked at Lavender, then they blinked. They smiled at her, then chuckled.

‘You are standing inside an aspect of myself. Everything around you, above you, beneath you and looking at you it me.’ Lavender shook her head.

‘I don’t understand. How can I be inside you and talking to you?’

‘That’s what The Priest said to The Nun,’ Bluejay chuckled. Lavender marched up to Bluejay.

‘I’m being serious...’ Suddenly, Bluejay vanished. Lavender turned around. She looked up and down, left to right for the mysterious dandy, but they were nowhere to be seen.

‘You know I’m not confined to three dimensional laws like yourself.’ Bluejay reappeared in front of Lavender. She gulped and stepped back. As she did, she tripped back. Bluejay vanished again, then they reappeared behind Lavender to catch her.

‘Careful, careful. We can’t have you or the baby injured, now can we?’ As Lavender caught her balance, she pulled herself out of Bluejay’s arms, slapping them away from her.

‘I was brought here for a reason,’ Lavender snapped. ‘Why?’

Bluejay stared at her for a moment. They tilted their head back, then forward. When they titled it back into position, they blinked. ‘Because of your child.’

Lavender gasped, holding her stomach. She looked at it, then looked at Bluejay. ‘My baby? Why? What do you want with my baby?’

‘Your baby is of no personal importance to me, but my superiors are invested in the child’s welfare.’

‘Superiors?’

‘Like myself, they are not confined to three dimensions. Space, Time and Reality are nothing more than toys to them, sadly they don’t play with them often. They don’t want to break it, personally I think they worry too much.’

‘Why? What’s important about my baby?’

‘Don’t know,’ said Bluejay, shrugging their shoulders. ‘To be honest, I don’t care. A job’s a job. My superiors ask for it, I give it to them.’

Then Bluejay walked up to Lavender, placing their hand upon her shoulder.

'What are you doing?' Lavender snapped. 'Get your hand off me!'

She tried to slap Bluejay's hand off her, but the blue dandy's grip was tight.

'Let go of me!' Lavender shouted. 'I said let go!' She tried to push Bluejay away from her, but they didn't budge. Their grip tightened. Lavender began to wince, then whimper.

'I do not care for you or your child. I'm insulted that my eternity is being wasted on you.'

Lavender tried to pull away from the blue dandy, but she couldn't. her legs were stiff, frozen in place. Suddenly Bluejay vanished, followed by the green space. Lavender was alone, standing in a black void. Lavender gasped as life flowed back into her legs. She looked around, her body trembling. Her breathing grew heavier as her veins pulsated rapidly. Suddenly Lavender jumped, then shriek.

'W-who's there?' Lavender shouted. 'Who touched my leg? Get off me!' She shouted. 'Leave me alone! I said get off me!' As Lavender screamed, she closed her eyes.

'It's all right love, calm down.' A woman spoke to Lavender. Lavender opened her eyes and looked up. Standing over her was a short, plump middle-aged woman with ear length dyed red hair. She was wearing dark blue trousers and a waist coat with a light blue long sleeved shirt.

'Is everything alright love?' The woman enquired. 'Would you like me to call someone for you?' Lavender shook her head and stuttered.

'No, no, no. This can't be right, I was. . .' She looked down at the floor, covered in muddy shoe prints. Then she looked to her right, behind her was a lavatory with a sign that read *Out of Order*. She

turned around and looked up, there were three electronic screens with a list of train timetables.

‘But I was... this is the train station. How did I get here?’ Suddenly there was a distant rumble, growling like a heavy thunderstorm.

‘What the hell was that?’ The middle-aged woman enquired. She made a quick smile at Lavender and rushed towards the entrance.

‘W—wait, wait!’ Lavender shouted as she tried to reach out for the middle-aged woman. ‘Don’t leave me!’

But Lavender’s cries went unheard, for the middle-aged woman had rushed through the entrance. Lavender saw the middle-aged woman cover her mouth and her body shiver. She fell to her knees and wept. The sound of sirens and alarms could be heard in the distance, followed by the echoes of human panic. Lavender’s body quaked; her breathing grew shaky. She heard her teeth chatter as her heart thumped a little quicker, gradually making its way towards her throat. Then she spotted something from the corner of her eye, it was on the floor. Slowly, she turned to her left to see what it was. It was a soggy, mud-stained torn poster. On it was an angel swathed in blue robes, beneath it were three words *Always. Watching. You.*

Benny and Jem

*With special thanks to Rebecca Cavanagh
for inspiration, feedback and advice.*

Halloween. For some, it is a night for dressing up and gorging on sweets. Usually for Benny, it's the night she closes the curtains, turns off the lights and pretends no one's home.

The lights were not on in Bernice's bedroom as she laid slumped upon her bed. Her head and shoulders lent against a folded pillow. A black laptop rested on her crossed right leg; its screen was folded in a little for the light to shine upon the keyboard.

'Malvina dashed through the forest, her pulse raced as her heart thumped as fast as a hummingbird's wing,' Benny muttered to herself as she typed. She stared at her screen for a moment as she drew a deep breath and sighed.

'Bit repetitive, I've used too many *As's*.' She drew another breath 'Just get this chapter done and fix it later.' She returned to typing. 'She could hear gallop of the spectre's horse as it charged through the woods. Its screech like whinny echoed into Malvina's ears as she... as she...' Benny let off a loud groan. She rubbed her hand down her face, knocking off her French Connection glasses.

'I can't get a sodding paragraph finished, let alone a chapter.' She rolled her eyes and flicked her right temple. 'I blame you for this, you've turned to mush on me.' As she began to save her work, there was a phone call. Benny's eyes widened as she gasped; she began to pat down her bed.

'Phone, phone, where's the...' then Benny looked up. She could hear its ring echo through her door, she groaned then sighed.

‘Downstairs. Of course I left it down there, bringing it with me made too much sense.’

She headed towards her door, then raced down the stairs. Frantically, she searched the draws next to the stained glass window near the door. Benny shuffled through bills and take away menus. Suddenly, there was a rap at the door.

‘Trick or treat!’ cried a group of children, Benny froze. Her eyes locked onto the ceiling; the light was on. There was another knock; the door slightly shook.

‘Trick or treat!’ the children called out again, this time a little louder. Benny slowly turned her head to face the light switch. She crept towards it but the door banged and quaked once more.

‘Trick or treat!’ the children cried. Benny reached towards the switch and flicked the light off.

‘Wanker!’ an older voice cried out as the group of children walked away.

‘Charming,’ Benny thought to herself. She returned to her search, but the phone had stopped ringing. Finally, she found it underneath a flyer for Pizza GoGo. When Benny scrolled through her phone, she made a quiet groan.

‘The hospital.’ As she about to phone back, there was a *PING*. ‘We are writing to inform you that Jemma’s appointment has been moved to next. . . Oh come on’, Benny read to herself before moaning. She then went down the hall and into the front room. Sitting by the sofa underneath the side light, reading a copy of *Guards, Guards* by Terry Pratchett was a ten year old girl. She wore glasses over green face paint and a black cloak over her clothes. On top of her head was a pointed, floppy hat. As Benny walked in, she placed her hands upon her hips and sighed.

‘Jemma, I got a text from the doctors. Your operation’s been

moved to next Wednesday.' Jemma looked up from her book, her glasses slid down her nose just a little bit.

'Why's that?'

'Because your appendix is still in a, and I quote, "Within a reasonably sustainable threshold".'

'So it won't explode *just* yet,' said Jemma, pointing as if to make an exclamation mark.

'Couldn't have put it better myself. Anyway, you ready?'

'Yeah, just a sec.'

She put her book on a sofa arm, then put her reading glasses away. She then wheeled herself out of the living room into the hall. Benny went to grab her keys on the mantle place. Underneath them were a couple of takeaway menus.

'Do you have your basket with you?' Benny asked Jemma. Suddenly Jemma spotted the pumpkin basket; it was on the mantle place. She hit the brakes on her chair and spun the wheels around. Then she unlocked the brake and wheeled herself towards the mantle place. As she was halfway across the living room, Benny followed her. As Jemma was about to grab the pumpkin basket, Benny reached out for it too.

'Hold of Jemma, I'll grab it for you.'

'No worries Mum, I've got it.' However, Benny grabbed the basket and placed it in her daughter's lap. Jemma looked down at the pumpkin, then looked up at her mother and sighed.

'But I had it Mum.'

*

The night was cold and uneventful; most houses Benny and Jemma passed were quiet, the lights were off. One of the neighbours

answered Benny and Jemma's knock at the door. She was an old woman with curly grey hair and wore a light blue jacket.

'Oh, what a brave little thing you are, don't let anyone tell you what you can and can't do, you can accomplish anything, don't let your condition hold you back,' said the old woman. After Benny and Jemma left, the former thought to herself, 'I wonder if she gives that speech to all good little boys and girls – or does she just reserve it for children with disabilities.'

However, Jemma's expression was heavy. 'Condition? Does she think I'm ill or something?' She glanced down at her lap. Then she turned to face her left, looking down at the wheel. 'Oh, of course. Why do people think disability's a disease? Do I look like I've got the plague?'

'Jem, you alright?' Benny enquired. Jemma looked up at her mother and smiled.

'Yeah,' Benny smiled and Jem smiled back. Then she turned to face forward, then she looked back down at her lap. As they walked past more quiet houses, Benny and Jemma decided to call it quits and head back home.

*

Benny turned on the artificial fireplace and collapsed into her fat burgundy sofa and sighed. Halloween, for all and intents and purposes, was over.

'Mum, look how many sweets I have,' Jemma declared as she shook her plastic pumpkin basket. Benny smiled at Jemma, she closed her eyes and sank into her sofa.

'God, what an evening,' Benny thought to herself, but it was all over now. Jemma placed the basket on the other sofa and wheeled

herself out into the hall. She went over to the light switch near the stairs and flicked it on.

‘Right then,’ Jemma thought to herself. ‘Here we go.’

In the living room, Benny opened her eyes. She got to her feet then stretched her arms.

‘See what’s on telly,’ she muttered to herself. As she looked around for the remote, Benny’s ears pricked. A noise came from the hall. It sounded like a *Ching* or a *Chune*, like metallic rustling. She put her search for the remote on hold and headed into the hall. Jemma circled around the space between the front door and the stairs, her feet pointed towards the ceiling as she did a wheelie. She chuckled to herself as went faster and faster before stopping.

‘Yes! A new record!’ she triumphantly chuckled as she gently brought her feet back down.

‘Jesus Jemma!’ Benny shouted. She darted over to her daughter, crouching down to her side to hold the wheelchair down.

‘Mum, what are you...’

‘What were you thinking Jem?’

‘Mum, I’m alright. I was just...’

‘Just what? Messing about with your chair?’

‘I’m not messing about. I know what I’m doing.’

‘No you don’t! You’re ten. I mean, what if you fell back and cracked your head open, then what?’

‘You’re like everyone else, Mum!’ Jemma snapped. Benny’s eyes grew wide as she gasped.

‘Don’t you dare raise your...’

‘You don’t think I’m capable of doing anything, that I can’t do things by myself. People either think I’m ill or they try to baby me. They treat me like I’m stupid.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Benny sighed and rubbed her face. ‘God, what the hell was I thinking?’ Benny said to herself. Immediately, she reached over to Jemma and held her tightly. ‘I’m sorry Jem, I shouldn’t have reacted like that.’

‘I’m sorry I upset you Mum.’

‘Oh God, no Jem. You didn’t, it’s just...’ Benny looked at her daughter with heavy eyes and sighed. She held her daughters hand and stroked it softly with her thumb.

*

Benny laid back in her bed, once again her head rested against a folded pillow. Her laptop was balanced between her waist and right leg and her fingers were poised over the keyboard. She stared at her Word document, watching the line at the end of her paragraph blink in and out of existence.

‘Oh come on you idiot,’ she said to herself, sharply inhaling air. ‘Your imagination can’t be that starved.’ She put her laptop down and got off her bed. She then crouched down and reached underneath, pulling a creased and battered black leather box.

*

Jemma laid in her bed with her head and shoulders resting against a folded pillow. The lamp on the right side draw next to her bed was on, glowing an orange hue underneath a beige shade. Just next to the lamp was a pen and a white notebook. Written upon the cover with blue ink were the words *The Witches of Tar’Krov* by Jemma Fae. Jemma picked up the pen and notebook. She opened it, removing the bookmark between two pages and began to write.

‘Marsaili wheeled herself near the edge of the crimson cliff,’ Jemma read in her head. ‘Behind her, the pale white sun began to rise behind Castle Tar’Krov, its ghostly rays illuminated the blood red land with a snowy aurora. She leaned forward in her chair to peek over the serrated edge of the cliff. For years she had been told that she could not ride a Lindworm, that it was impossible for someone like her. Today she was going to prove them wrong.

‘As she peeked over the edge, a fierce gust of wind knocked her back. A gargantuan set of wings emerged from behind the cliff edge. With one powerful swoop, a great golden Lindworm shot up. Its snake-like body swayed as it flapped towards the sky. Marsaili wheeled herself back to the edge. Underneath it was a flock of Lindworms soaring through the air. Marsaili’s heart raced as her pulse grew quicker. Her body trembled as she looked down over the cliff edge, it was a thousand foot drop. She closed her eyes and lent back into her chair.

“I can’t do it,” she whispered to herself. “They’re right, I can’t.”

‘Then she opened her eyes.

‘No, Come one. It’s now or never.

‘She drew a deep breath and lent forward, allowing herself to fall out of her chair. She could feel the wind rushing against her as her heart thumped heavily. She fell through the air until. . . Yes! she had caught a Lindworm, she was riding on its back. She couldn’t believe it, she had done the impossible.’

*

Benny opened up the black box, it had been stuffed to the brim with sheets of paper and notebooks. She began to rummage through

them, flipping through paper and pages from notebooks. Some were half filled, their pages creased from penwork.

‘Nothing,’ Bernice groaned as she ran her palm across her face. ‘What’s the point of buying these notepa—’ Benny paused. Her right eyebrow was raised as she leaned towards the box. At the bottom of the box were a trio of old, slightly tanned photographs. Benny scooped them up into her hand, she could feel the slightly creased plastic beneath her thumb.

She could smell the celluloid as she held the pictures to eyelevel. One was of Benny in her late teens, standing by the gates of the maritime campus of Greenwich University. The second was of Benny in her early twenties at a comic convention, above her was the banner ‘2000ad: 2006’. She was wearing a t-shirt printed with the words ‘Cabbalistics Inc Forever!’. She chuckled at the second photo.

Finally, the last photo was of Benny in a hospital bed. In her arms she cradled a new-born baby wrapped in swaddling cloth. Benny smiled at the last one, gently stroking it with her thumb. Then her smile faded, she closed her eyes as she drew a heavy sigh.

‘You really screwed the pooch tonight Benny.’ She opened her eyes once more. ‘I’ve got to make it up with her, properly.’ As she was about to put the pictures to one side, she had a another look at the Greenwich photo. Suddenly she gasped, her eyes grew wide as she felt a jolt of energy trickle down her spine. She glanced back at the photo of her holding Jem as a new-born before returning to the Greenwich picture.

‘Well,’ Benny said to herself, ‘you’re not doing anything this Saturday’.

*

The phone alarm went off, its shrill scream made the bed vibrate.

'You're going to have to get up at some point,' Benny muttered to herself. She reached out to grab the phone 'Christ, 7:00 a.m. already'. Benny crawled out of bed. She stretched, she slipped into some pyjama bottoms and headed off to Jenna's room across the landing. Benny gently woke her daughter.

'Jem, we've got to get down to Luton today, it's going to be a long journey.'

Benny proceeded to carry Jemma out of her bed.

'But I don't want to get up,' Jemma stated.

'Neither did I, guess we're not morning people Bubba,' said Benny.

Jemma groaned.

'God, I forgot to wash off your face paint,' said Benny. 'You're all green.'

'I should see a doctor,' Jemma chuckled. 'But I thought that wasn't until next week?'

*

Benny drew a bath for Jemma, as she was helping her daughter change out of her pyjamas, Jemma said, 'Appendixes are weird.'

'Weird?'

'It's inside us but we don't need it.'

'Well, we used to need it thousands of years ago,' said Benny.

'Wonder what other things we'll lose?' Jemma pondered to herself.

'I'm not sure Jem, we could look it up later.'

Jemma looked at her mother, something was on her mind.

'Do you think Dad will have to come?'

‘Today?’

‘For the operation.’

‘No bubba, he won’t.’

‘He never comes to see me.’

‘Some people don’t want to be parents, your Dad was one of those people,’ said Benny. ‘He doesn’t want us in his life and that’s his problem. We don’t need him, I have you and you’re all I’ll ever need.’

*

Benny looked at her phone. ‘Still got time Benny, you’ve still got time,’ she thought to herself. Benny and her daughter had arrived at the railway station.

‘No que, so far so good,’ thought Benny. She bought a return ticket for Jemma and herself.

‘Right Jem,’ said Benny, ‘all we need to do now is wait 15 minutes for the 7:59 a.m. train to Luton and...’

‘We regret to announce that the 7:59 a.m. to Luton has been delayed,’ the announcer said over the speaker.

Benny froze for a moment, she looked up at the electronic sign which read ‘LUTON TRAIN DELAYED, NEXT TRAIN AT 8:59 a.m.’ Her eyes widened and her fists clenched as she drew a deep breath.

‘An hour late. Of course our train would be. What else was it going to be,’ said Benny.

‘Are you OK, Mum?’ asked Jemma.

‘I’m OK Bubba, we just have to wait a while and...’ Benny began to search her bag. ‘And... I forgot my book.’ Benny paused for a moment. ‘There’s a café, I think they sell some books and magazines.’

*

Benny stared at the bookshelf, her eyes were drawn to one particular title.

‘God, I didn’t think I’d see you here.’ She picked the book up from the shelf. The cover depicted a young woman in a white dress. She had with long, raven hair. She was in the arms of a muscular, angelic looking man in Edwardian clothing with an open shirt. The text beneath the couple read *Time’s Angel* by *Bernice Fae*.

‘Weird,’ said Jemma, ‘you and the writer have the same name.’

‘It’s my book.’

Jemma gasped.

‘Are you serious? You never told me.’

‘Didn’t I?’

‘You’re a writer Mum, how cool’s that?’

‘I’ll explain once I’ve paid for our stuff,’ Benny smiled.

After they left the café, Jemma launched her questions at Benny.

‘When did you write a book?’ asked Jemma.

‘God, it was years ago. About five years before you were born,’ said Benny.

‘What’s it about?’, asked Jemma.

‘Well... it’s about a lonely woman named Rachael who meets an alien time traveller called The Dagda, they have some adventures, battle racist cyborgs and at the end they...’

‘They what?’ asked Jemma.

Benny paused for a moment and looked at her daughter.

‘They... get to know each other, very well...’

‘Can I read it?’ Jemma asked.

Benny gulped, she began to rub the back of her neck.

‘Jem, my book... it isn’t... it’s a little too grown up for—’

'I'm ten Mum. I'm not that little. Please?'

'OK,' Benny sighed. 'You can read a little bit.' She began to flip through her book, her eyes moved right to left as she scan-read the pages.

'Here's a good bit,' said Benny, handing the paperback to her daughter. Jemma got out her reading glasses and quietly read to herself.

'The metallic city was engulfed in an inferno, the shells of deceased Dra'ak'Tavreks littered the silver ground. The Dagda and Rachel sprinted down the burning corridor, dodging the bolts of energy being fired at them.

"Sore losers, don't you think?" chuckled The Dagda.

"We're being fired at by a death cult of cyborg mutants and your making jokes!" said Rachel.

"He who laughs last, Rachel, he who laughs..." Suddenly a bolt of energy fired a foot or so near them, The Dagda glanced behind his shoulder.

"On second thought, now's not the time for jokes." The Dagda and Rachel made a right turn down the corridor, Rachel's eyes widened when she saw the T.E.S.T.O.V.

'Test Of?' said Jemma as she stopped reading.

Temporal, Ethereal, Space/Time, Omniversal Vessel,' said Benny. 'I like acronyms.'

Jemma went back to reading.

"We made it Dagda!" Rachel declared.

"We're not out the woods just yet," said The Dagda.

'The Dra'ak'Tavreks troops were starting to catch up to the duo.

"O-BLIT-ER-ATE!" they chanted. Rachel and The Dagda charged through the T.E.S.T.O.V. doors. The Dagda dashed to the controls whilst Rachel slammed the doors shut.'

Once again, Jemma stopped reading.

'Hang on Mum,' said Jem, 'your story is a bit like Doc...'

'It's an homage,' said Benny. Jem went back to reading.

"Just need to set the coordinates and..."

"I'd hurry if I were you, Dagda," said Rachel, holding the doors shut as the Draxa'ta'als tried to break in.

"Just give me a few seconds and... Now!" shouted The Dagda. There was a gust of wind followed by a groaning noise as the T.E.S.T.O.V. took off.

"You did it, Dagda, you defeated the Draxa'ta'als," said Rachel. The Dagda walked up to Rachel.

"No, we did it," said The Dagda. He placed his hands upon Rachel's waste, slowly caressing her downwards, then...'

'OK,' said Benny as she took the book off her daughter. 'I think that's enough.'

Jem looked at her mother with a raised eyebrow.

'You OK, Mum?' asked Jemma. 'You're acting a bit weird.'

Benny looked at her daughter, gulped, then drew in a breath.

'That section of the book... well, maybe we should wait until you're a little older. Then you can read it.'

'I'm only ten Mum,' Jem scoffed.

*

As Benny and Jemma were about to approach the lift, Benny paused.

'Oh you have got to be kidding me.' The sign read *Out of Order*. Benny tried to call for help, but the train staff were on the other platform, dealing with an argumentative old woman. Benny looked up the stairs, she looked back at Jemma and sighed, 'Jem, in this life, if you want something done, a lot of the time you have to do it yourself.'

Benny lifted Jemma up and carried her with her right arm, she dragged the wheelchair up the stairs with her left arm. People went up and down the stairs, some stared at the slender raven haired woman carrying a child in one arm and dragging a wheelchair in the other.

'God,' Benny thought to herself as her right arm began to strain, it was clear Jemma was getting to too old to be carried.

'Just one more step and... Finally!' Benny exclaimed. She glanced down the stairs and saw a group of people looking up.

'Thanks for the help,' Benny said to the onlookers.

Benny approached the stairs leading down to Platform One.

Rinse and repeat, Benny thought to herself. Benny climbed down the steps, child in one arm, wheelchair in the other, and people watched. Jemma looked back at the bystanders as they carried on with their daily routines, unphased by what had transpired.

'Prigs,' she thought to herself.

*

Having finally arrived on platform one, Benny helped her daughter back into her wheelchair. They waited for the train, and waited, and waited.

'Mum,' Jemma asked. 'If you wrote a book, why aren't you rich? I mean, shouldn't you have royalties or something?'

Benny crouched down to look at her daughter.

'Well,' Benny sighed, 'my book appealed to a small audience'.

'How small?' asked Jemma.

'Very small,' said Benny.

'Why did you write a story then?' asked Jemma.

'Sometimes I've asked myself that question. I guess that when

all is said and done, I wrote my book because I wanted to write the story I wanted to tell.'

'I liked it,' Jem smiled.

'Really?'

'Yeah. Don't you think your story's good?'

'Probably not.' Then Benny smiled. 'But it's my story.'

Eventually, the train arrived.

*

The train was crowded, the seats were taken. Benny stood, keeping her daughter close to her.

'We're trapped,' Benny thought to herself, 'trapped in a can of fat, sweaty sardines. Moving at the speed of a rollercoaster whilst paradoxically taking forever to reach its destination, like a pringles tin packed to the brim with people. No, a rickety elongated bean can bursting at the seams with up right, mostly hairless mammals. And that's on a good day.'

Then Benny sighed. 'Three years studying BA Creative Writing and that's all you've got to show for it.' Benny began to take in her surroundings, the train car seemed to be littered with people in suits.

'God, they're everywhere,' thought Benny, 'a school of suits, a gaggle of business types. A parliament of yuppies?... Whatever you call them, they're everywhere.'

'PC mother and child,' one voice muttered. 'I want that one... I don't like it,' another voice quietly cackled. Benny quickly looked around.

'Probably nothing,' she thought to herself. Jemma looked up and stared at the men, though careful not to look directly at them.

'PC Mother and Child?'

'How much tax money is wasted on them,' a voice muttered. Benny sharply turned her head and saw a group of men in suits, one of the men was pointing at Jemma and Benny.

'I think she saw us,' the man whispered to his fellow suits before sitting back down. 'Pricks,' Benny thought to herself.

'What's their problem?' Jemma thought to herself.

Suddenly, there was a burst of laughter from the men in suits. Benny turned to face them.

'What is your problem?' Benny asked them.

'Excuse me?' said the first suited man. Jemma looked up at her Mum, her eyes grew wide as her heart thumped a little faster.

'What are you doing Mum?' she thought to herself.

'How much tax money is wasted on *THEM!* You seemed to be talking about my daughter,' said Benny.

'Look love, we have no idea what you're talking about,' said the fourth suited man.

'Mum don't, just leave it,' Jemma thought to herself. She dug her fingernails into the arms of her chair.

'Do you have a problem with children with disabilities?' said Benny.

'Mum,' Jemma thought, 'you're making things worse, please!' Her breathing grew heavier as she looked around the carriage.

'Listen, love, I have no idea what you're on about, said the second suited man, but I don't like what your implying and if you don't stop I'll...'

'You'll do what?' said one passenger.

The second suited man looked at the passenger.

'Stay out of it.'

Another passenger stood up.

'I heard them say those things.'
Another passenger followed.
'You got a problem with kids with disabilities.'
More passengers confronted the men in suits.
'Look, we don't want any trouble,' said the third suited man.
More eyes began to lock onto the suited men.
'Calling at Charlton,' a voice announced over the speaker. As
the train stopped, the first suited man pressed the doors.
'This isn't our stop,' said the fourth suited man.
'Shut up,' whispered the second suited man. The suited men
left the train.
'Good riddance,' one woman said. People went over to Benny
and Jemma.
'Are you alright?' one passenger asked them.
'Thank you,' Benny smiled. 'Everyone, thank you.'

*

'Calling at Luton station,' said a voice over the speaker.
The passengers helped Benny with getting Jemma off the train,
Benny and Jemma thanked them. As the train began to depart,
Benny held Jemma's hand.
'We made it Jem, and with an hour to spare. Now, we just need
to find a taxi and...'
'Mum, why did you argue with those men?'
Benny paused, she looked down at Jemma with a baffled look.
'Because they were being horrible about you. They're disgusting
people bubba, don't let...'
'I know Mum, it's just...'
Before her daughter could finish,
Benny crouched down to her eye level. With one brush she gently

stroked her daughters face. Initially she smiled at Jemma, but when she looked into her daughters heavy eyes, she sensed something was wrong.

‘Is everything alright Jem?’

Jemma looked at her mother, she tried to smile but it fell as she sighed.

‘Are you still upset about last night?’

Benny jumped a little, as if a cold finger flicked the back of her neck. Her mouth opened as she attempted to speak, her right hand was raised as her fingers were readying themselves to gesture. But upon looking into her daughters, Benny relaxed herself and sighed.

‘God, you’re like my Mum,’ said Benny, ‘can’t get anything past you. I just... like I... I was in the wrong. I shouldn’t have treated you like that, *Ever*.’

‘Is that why we’re in London today?’

‘How did you rumble that one?’ Benny said rhetorically.

Jemma reached to hold Benny’s hand, she smiled at her mother as she stroked her hand with her index finger.

‘I know you’re looking out for me Mum,’ said Jemma, ‘I know you just want to help. But I’m not helpless, I don’t need everything done for me.’ Jemma then turned her sights to her chair, turning to her side to look at the wheels and sighed.

‘People don’t really notice me at first, they see my chair. And because of it, they think I’m not capable of anything, that I’m something to be rescued. And I know that they probably mean well and I don’t want to be rude but, I didn’t ask for their help. I just want people to see me for well... *Me*’.

Benny placed her left hand over Jemma’s. She then reached over to her daughter to kiss her on the forehead.

'I'm sorry Jemma. And you're right. If people can't see you for being *You*, then it's their problem.'

*

As they left Luton station, Jemma looked at her mother and said: 'Are you writing another book?'

'Trying to,' Benny sighed.

Jemma reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a black notebook.

'What's this Jem?' Benny queried as Jemma handed her the notebook. The raven haired woman examined the cover, muttering to herself as she read the title. She stopped walking to opened the book and began reading. After five or so minutes, she turned her attention to her daughter and smiled.

'Bloody hell Jemma, it's good. Genuinely!'

'You think so?'

'Better than anything I could ever write. Jemma, you need to type it up.'

'Well, I was looking for an editor,' Jemma smiled.

HOLLY ROFF

The Escalator

The check-in lines are short and move quickly. It's not as busy as I thought it would be. I look up at my dad, who is staring straight ahead and trying so hard to pretend he's fine. I find myself wishing for the first time that the lines were a little bit longer.

The old woman in front of us heads to the counter with five bags and relief hits me, knowing I have a few more minutes until it all becomes real. Then, a counter further down the line opens up and the feeling fades away as I jolt forward.

'Any bags to check-in?' asks the man behind the counter, grinning widely. I try to do the same, but my mouth barely moves.

'Just one,' answers my dad for me. He places my heavy rucksack, the one he insisted on carrying from the car, onto the conveyor belt.

'Passport?'

I fumble through my smaller bag and pull out my shiny new passport, almost dropping it.

The man takes it and flicks through to the awful picture of my face, taken back when this was just a bullet point on a bucket list, before turning his head to the computer beside him.

I glance sideways at my dad. He's not doing a very good job at hiding his misery anymore and refuses to look anywhere but at the wall behind the counter, behind which my bag is slowly disappearing.

'Here you go,' says the man, handing back my passport with a plane ticket tucked inside. 'Gate 32A, boarding starts at quarter-past-nine. Have a good trip!'

Nodding, and trying my best to return his warm smile, I turn with only my small bag slung over my shoulder, my passport and

boarding pass clenched tightly in my hand and my dad walking robotically beside me.

'Do you want me to buy you something to eat?' he asks, the tiniest tinge of hope in his voice.

'I don't think I can eat anything,' I answer honestly.

My dad nods slowly, and I regret not saying yes.

Instead, we follow the overhead signs for security until we realise that, to get there, we have to go up some escalators that are for people with boarding passes only.

It's time to say goodbye.

There is a small crowd clustered around the bottom of the escalators as people hug before they part. I see no tears among them, and I'm surprised, even though my own eyes are dry.

I turn to my dad, whose eyes are becoming redder by the second, and I realise that I haven't seen him cry since my grandparents died.

'Thank you for bringing me to the airport.' I smile as brightly as I can manage, trying to muster excitement for the journey ahead, and hug him tightly.

He squeezes me back just as tight, like he used to when I was small and I would run to him, needing him to protect me from the monsters. Now I was leaving, and I would be too far away for him to keep them at bay.

'Promise me you'll be safe, and that you'll message me when you're about to get on the plane, and when you land.'

I look up at him, smiling for real now, as the excitement begins to take over from the fear and anxiety.

'I promise, dad.' I have to pull myself out of his grip.

He smiles back as much as he can, 'I'll miss you.'

I turn, walk to the foot of the escalator and, after a moment's hesitation, step on.

As it carries me up, I look back and wave. My dad is still smiling and waves back, but I can tell from the way he's blinking that he's trying so hard not to cry until I can't see him anymore.

Strangely, I'm not sad. I only feel scared and excited about setting off on my own.

I start to wonder whether it's easier to say goodbye when you're leaving because everything is new, whereas when someone leaves you, you can't help but notice all the holes they leave behind in your life.

I look at my dad one last time, trying to show him with my wide grin that I'm going to be okay. I see a proper smile through his fogged-up glasses, and turn away.

As I reach the top of the escalators, I step forward, determined not to look back.

GEORGIA ROWE

Meetings

From birth until around six or seven, I was a Jehovah's Witness. The faith didn't run through the entire family, not even through the entire immediate family. My father isn't, never has been, and certainly never had any intention of ever becoming a Witness. But mum was born and raised that way, and even chose to be baptised in the faith. Insiders refer to the faith as 'The Truth'. Until she was thirty-five years old, Mum routinely studied the writings, missed the non-recognised festivals and celebrations (birthdays, Christmases), prayed before meals, generally stuck to all the given rules, perfectly and precisely. Perhaps this is the reason she now has no conceivable perception of acceptable behaviour. Only one rule was broken before her escape. She married someone from beyond The Truth, from outside. But that's another story.

Jehovah's Witnesses are Christian, but they don't believe in the trinity. Jehovah is their name for God, and he isn't part of the trinity. The holy spirit is just a force of Jehovah, not a person, and Jesus, apparently, wasn't resurrected. There's no Christmas because it's not Jesus' real birthday, and no birthdays because they're pagan. All these aspects are important when trying to explain why my mum, and hers, are both very strange women. Strange isn't even the right term, they're just... unaccustomed. They're on the edge of things, especially my mum, who was thrust upon the world at thirty-five with a scarce knowledge of who to trust. My grandparents (my Granny until she died quite recently, and my living Grandfather) were always encouraged to have limited contact with us. You literally, and actually, get shunned forever if you leave. I'm guessing this is because the risk of you taking others with you is extremely


high. Most of the elders know exactly what they're missing, and the general rule seems to be to not allow children to opt into life either, not even uni is acceptable. But my mum wanted us to have life. So here I am writing this, for uni, with absolutely no faith within me whatsoever. At least not yet anyway. And apparently, this is a life too.

The most frequently demanding of rules, however, is that no matter how ill or perhaps busy, tired or pregnant you may be, you must attend the meetings. These meetings are in the evenings on weekdays on Sunday afternoons, in a building which my mum helped build when she was a teenager. It's called a 'Kingdom Hall', and Wellingborough's resides in Queensway, probably the third worst estate in the town. There are also huge 'Assemblies' that take place a couple of times a year, in huge football stadiums like Wembley or, these days, arenas like the N.I.A. They're basically just longer versions of the weekly meetings, but with everyone together, listening to various scriptures and teachings, and parading their best assets. It's our weekly meetings at the Kingdom Hall I remember, though; I was never old enough to go to an Assembly.


My sister is three years older than me, while my brother is three years younger. This means at the time when we were attending meetings, we ranged in age between nought and nine. My brother was mainly a babe in arms, now and again having to be taken out due to random outbursts of tears, that everyone else politely managed to refrain from until alone. Neither me nor my sister were old enough to know what was being said. Sometimes there would be a section aimed at us, the youth section, but it would be a passage, read with intention to appeal to children aged three to teens of eighteen. This is an axe that cuts through the faith, the lack of any real acknowledgement of what children are, how they

vary from one to the next, and with age. My mum is different to all the other mums, however. I suppose that's why we ended up leaving a few years later. But it was at these times when we had to behave like good Christians, when her anarchy really shone. It was the beginning of the countdown to her ultimate rule break.

We would consistently run away, down the aisles, along the front, round the back, into the toilets, maybe an attempt at the carpark, before being pulled back into the itchy emerald chairs. We always had to wear dresses, most of which Granny had made us. They always ended up crumpled and sweaty, particularly my sister's. My brother had various special cardigans, those too knitted by Granny, and the three of us would look like someone else's children for a few hours. There were other children my sister's age, and they all really used to go for it. On countless occasions mum has retold the story of when my sister got on the stage and spoke into the microphone. We were notorious delinquents, and my grandparents would become embarrassed rather quickly. My Granny, strong and Irish, truly loving but, from an era that had little time for love, so very unsure of how to show it, had the grip of an elephant's trunk and would use it to detain us at time she would finally manage to capture us. Mum though, would always scoop us up and whisper in our ears and giggle. She'd try to make us stop, but looking back now, I can see that she was just elated by the fact that we *could* break the rules. She didn't have any siblings to flurry about with, that elephant's grip went everywhere she did as a child. Granny, on the other hand, had had five siblings and was the eldest, so had a natural flair for authority. I'd imagine, and have some knowledge to back up those musings, that she stopped my mum from doing everything, and that very little fun was had in the twenty-three years she lived in their house. Therefore, *our* meetings turned into a competition of outlaw will.



During my last visit to the Kingdom Hall, I cried every second, staring at a box containing my Grandmother, who I hadn't seen for two years, while a man I'd never met before told me, my siblings, and a room full of people who already knew them, stories that we had never heard about her. That is my last actual memory of the place. The day was awful for several reasons; I hadn't been to Wellingborough for three years, I hadn't been to my Grandparents house for four, my mum was drunk, and my Grandad was hollow. I remember walking into their house for the first time in such a long time, the smell was still the same, sort of stale but clean, like it had been hoovered but the windows hadn't been opened since about 1998. Grandad stood at the door as we all entered one by one, each kissing him on the cheek as we passed him. This was always the ritual, the only difference now being I had to lean down to his cheek rather than him leaning down to me. The entire place felt smaller, quieter, colder, there was no food cooking and no one to make the tea, she was so clearly missing.



At the funeral, me, my brother and sister recognised about four people. We were never asked to speak, or for any memories, or if we would like to suggest any music. None of that, regardless of the fact my sister spent the last few weeks of my Granny's life travelling from Sheffield to Kettering, while at first my Granny was in a hospital and, eventually, a hospice. She sat with her for hours, looked after my grandad, and of course, paid for my mum to see her own mother for a final time. When my Granny actually died, my sister arranged all the paperwork, bought cards to the staff at the hospice, picked the clothes my Granny would be buried in, then had all control taken away from her by the witnesses. On the day, my Grandad didn't shed one tear, he didn't go to the hospice when they phoned and said she was in her last few hours, and he

wasn't with her when she died. No one was. No one cried at her funeral except me and my little brother. Our tears seemed to be yet another display of defiance against the accepted demeanour required of a Jehovah's Witness at a funeral.

The Kingdom Hall on Queensway in Wellingborough has now been knocked down, and rebuilt on the exact same spot, but smaller. My Grandad tells me they do this to save money to build Kingdom Halls in countries around the world that are less economically independent. So, my Granny's funeral was my final memory of that place, but the overriding one will always be of those rebellious rituals that once took place. One of my most enamoured memories, of times when things often took a bleaker turn.

MARIANA SANTOS PINHO

anti-gravity

I open my eyes. And I see it again. No pick hole, no number, no handle. Just a navy wooden door. As I touch it, I feel the wind from inside and I push it without knowing how. It is as if I don't have any matter on my body. All of the pain I'm feeling, all of my weight, all of my thoughts, stay on the other side of the door. All I see now, in this complete dark and cold side, is the stars. I look everywhere and it's endless. There's no floor, no walls, no roof. Just dark. There's a flash and I feel the room changing.

The stars start to fall, turning into heavy rain that washes the last print of the outside world. As it reaches the floor, it develops this black mirrored image underneath my feet. I can see myself in it. And it is so clear, as if I am looking through a veil. I then begin to move, not feeling anything, and realise that I'm floating instead of walking. As I float forward, every movement of mine is like a shotgun being fired. At first I hesitate, but if I keep moving the sound starts to fade away, so I don't stop. This feeling of not feeling is mesmerizing. And as the sounds stop, the shadow of movements leave an unclear trail of words. I keep on going to make sense of it. I read 'It's your fault' and the words cut me inside like the cold of the space I'm in. I almost forgot how this ached. I thought they took the pain away. I don't understand. As I become more and more upset, the cold around me condensates into the same breeze that I felt before. It's mad at my indignation, like I'm the one to blame for the pain I'm feeling.

While closing my eyes, I let myself be carried by the forces around me. I just want to float and keep floating. As I return back to my normal self, so does the room, and now there's nothing left

but emptiness. Emptiness and me. No pain, no feeling. Just the cold that I've always been akin to. Then suddenly, another flash and the room changes again.

Don't look back. – I feel this whisper all over my body.

Don't look back? – I mumble while I turn my head to the place I'm not supposed to look. In a second, I'm dragged out of that place by some kind of magnetic force and I'm back at the steps of the door. Again. For the third time.

*

I open my eyes and the weight of my body is back again. The pain that I so desperately wanted to escape comes rushing back to my body, like grains of sand forcing their way against my skin. If I had ignored that voice, I would have stayed there. I would be free again.

I guess third time is only a charm when you're trying to do something good and not trying to steal the reaper's job.

3 a.m.

My body begins to shiver as a blow from the outside world enters my window. This is when I know that tomorrow morning will be a cold and rainy one. I slowly get out of bed, and as I place my left foot on the chilly wooden floor, an iced wire infiltrates my skin and wanders through my flesh and bones. Before my whole body turns into a snowflake, I run to close the window. Who knew that after a very stuffy day like yesterday we would have such an arctic dawn today?

After closing the window, I race back to bed, right next to a very familiar figure. He notices the goosebumps on my skin and then I feel his hot hands colliding on my back. His warmth travels through my body and keeps me cosy. This is how he makes me hate the cold, when he spends the nights warming me up. He pulls me closer to his body and in a second our temperature rises drastically. I get the chills as soon as I notice the warmth of his breath on my neck, as he leans to kiss me. And, oh boy, the way I melt with that kiss.

It's like he touches me without even touching me. When he stares in my eyes I can feel it like a burn, and with just that one look, he sets my whole body on fire. He whispers in my ear, saying the most unpredictable words, and all my body hair erects. I can smell his cologne, and its fresh wave cleans my inner self. Then when he kisses me, I taste the most intense and endless galaxy of flavours, way before our tongues even meet.

SUNZIDA UDDIN

Maya of the Sea

Sucking in her breath, fearing her voice would betray her, Maya crept across the town's outskirts. It had taken her some time to escape; her father's eyesight was oddly perceptive and she could not leave. She was a watched prisoner, no matter the room. Even the glass eyes of her precious porcelain dolls seemed ominous in the sunlight, as if their rosebud lips were hiding something from her. Maya did not wait to find out – when her watch struck eleven, her battered hands flung opened the door with newfound vigour and she slipped away under the veil of night.

Each step was a step closer, either to her freedom or her father's thrashing, and thrashing it might've been had it not been for the basement's silent floorboards. Countless times Maya slept in the safety of their walls; as she took that final walk out, she brushed her hand across the cracks, fingertips bidding them goodbye. With only her orange hair behind her, Maya slowly opened the basement door. Completely silent, it offered no resistance.

For a second, a twinge of sadness overcame her, knowing there was no return after this. The mental image of a happy family flashed in her mind but she quickly closed her eyes, denying what could've been. There was a stab of anger and fear as she reminisced on her parents. The wound festered as Maya continued.

Why? she thought. *Why did it have to be me? Why did I have to be stuck like this?*

She wasn't sure who she was talking to, her mind was scrambled and she could only manage the cathartic release of reflecting on her life.

Former life, her mind corrected. *It's not going to happen again. It will not happen again.*

Maya opened her eyes into the near-black darkness of the basement.

Taking a deep breath, she said a shaky 'thank you' to the basement door and stepped out from the concrete slabs, the dewy grass, salvation on her bruised feet. After the initial few quiet steps, adrenaline seized and she broke out into a run. There were no directions, only the drum of her heart and the tapping of her feet moving her forward.

They had led her to here: the ruins of a desolate temple, a place of worship broken down by the sands of time. Pillars eroded, leaving nothing but shards of white marble jutting out from the soft brown dirt. The floor was coated in several layers of dust and grime. Nonetheless, Maya's aching feet welcomed it anyway, and as she took a seat, perched ever so diligently on the stairway edge, a cry of relief escaped her throat. She had run for so long that her heart still thudded with a fearful intensity, the bruises on her feet darkened with every movement.

Rubbing the veins on her wrist, Maya looked out to her surroundings. The hemline of her dress picked up the faintest of breezes, drifting ever so slightly against the stairs. She could see chunks of marble, slowly tumbling day by day, out to the nearby shoreline. In a few hours, they would be gone, replaced by a clump of sand or a pebble. Was it the air that moved them? Or did people come down and kick them? Maya couldn't help but wonder about the complexities of such a simple process.

By now, the buzzing in her lips, ears and fingers had left and Maya felt stable enough to stand without collapsing. Rising up, she noticed a glint coming from the shoreline's edge. Slowly, she crept around the pillars. There was nobody there, yet Maya couldn't shake off the feeling of being watched.

She plunged her hands into the damp sand, frosty water sending shivers down her spine. Wincing, Maya moved her hands around, feeling for the object. When she felt something smooth, she retracted her arms. Her palms revealed a shell, no bigger than her little finger. It was a beautiful opalescent colour, and if she turned it around, the smooth white backside reflected the sky's stars.

Rubbing her thumb against the surface filled a sense of calmness within Maya's racing heart. She was glad no one was here, for tears suddenly began forming in her eyes and dropped to the ground before she could wipe them away. Her breathing hitched, her body slowly shaking out the delayed reaction of grief: the grief of running away, the grief of abuse, the grief of being an unwanted child.

When her eyes finally dried up, Maya rubbed them again. The sensation stung, though she was unsure whether it was from distress or raw skin.

Maybe it was the sudden fatigue, she thought to herself. Her body forcefully stopped, causing her legs to fall, heavy as lead, to the sand.

Another sob caught in her throat, but no sound came out. Instead, lying on the shore and protected by the marble, Maya knew what she had to do.

There was only one way. One way she could ensure her happy ending.

She gave the seashell in her hand another rub. Clicking her thumbnail against the seashell's rim was oddly therapeutic to her, once again washing away the feeling of dread. A smile crept to Maya's face as she recalled a not-too-long-ago memory; Samuel, her neighbour, told her a secret: he claimed that seashells could summon a deity of the sea.

Back then, Maya had denounced his bold claim as boyish folly, but as she ran another finger against the fine grooves, she wondered if there was any truth to his myth. Samuel made her cross her heart twice in fear she would out him. Surely, that level of loyalty must have meant something significant.

If there was a deity of the sea, Maya wanted to see it—the creature so powerful to control the tides, yet so easily summoned by a fragile object. She grabbed the shell by both hands, and as Maya pressed down on her palms, the object snapped in two.

Clutching onto the broken shards, Maya closed her eyes. It was night, although the moonlight blazed as fiercely as the summer's sun, accompanied by twinkling stars. When she closed her eyes, however, it was completely dark.

Maya ambled forward; she didn't stop until she could feel the pressure of the water pushing against her chest. Numbed, Maya felt nothing aside from the slight bobbing of her body. She wondered whether the water's edge was pushing her back or pulling her forward.

Submerging her hands into the water, Maya let go of the broken pieces. Slowly, she opened her eyes in time to see them drifting away. A twinge of melancholy passed her lips, causing a frown to pass, but Maya forced herself to smile.

Truly a beautiful scene, she mused.

Maya's legs let out. Steadily, she plunged into the dark depths of the azure sea.

IV. SCRIPTS



LAURA EVANS

The Life of Riley

JACK is a man in his early sixties, nearing retirement. He has a deep Lancastrian accent that can carry over a room and is very charismatic. He talks a lot with his hands. When he turns it is with his whole body. He is a carpenter.

JACK is in the process of making some stairs in a house. He is sat down. Tools are lying everywhere. He is smoking a roll up and has a cup of tea next to him.

Jack of all trades. That's what I am. Started out making coffins as a boy in Lancashire; stopped that to do National service at 17. Best thing I did, got away from my stepmother. Found a new, better life down south; never looked back since. After the army, I found an apprenticeship in carpentry, and became one of the best joiners in my area.

Got married to a lovely lady. Rosemary. We met through her brother Tony. Now Tony. He was the real-life Arthur Daley, used to buy and sell cars in all sorts of conditions.

I had two kids, Jane and Sarah; I call Sarah Roo. They are the stars in my sky.

Pause.

I take great pride in my work. I always make sure it is done properly. No cutting corners and using cheap material like they do today. (*Laughs.*) That being said, Roo asked me to put some blinds up when she moved into her flat with littlun'. So, I used my new revolutionary product – 'No Nails'. Well you can guess what happened. But I didn't want to damage the plastic surround.

Pause.

I have Ankylosing Spondylitis – finally burned-out now; but my entire spine is fused. When it was at its peak though, Christ that was pain. Those swines tried to give me a wheelchair too, you know. No. There was absolutely no way in hell that I was gonna spend the rest of my bloody life stuck in a chair. And guess what? I proved them joe soaps wrong – I made sure to stay active, keep moving, keep my posture straight. Look how I turned out, not bad at all Jacko I say, not bad at all.

Go to black.

Come up on JACK sat at the table in his living room, by the window. It is a small one-bedroom bungalow; you can see the bedroom behind him. The table and everything you see is an absolute mess. Cluttered, ash, tea and burn stains etc. On the table is a cup of tea, a packet of chocolate digestives and an ash tray with a roll up in.

Do you know how many famous arses have sat on here?

JACK holds up an old looking toilet seat.

Nicked it from Magdalen College, Oxford. John O'Donnell and I were doing a few jobs there. John has been my best mate for over 50 years.

You know, he is a relative of Daniel O'Donnell – John's wife Mavis was obsessed with him. In her house Mav's mother would have a picture of the Pope hanging up on the wall, pride of place. As soon as her mother left, that picture would immediately be replaced by that of Daniel O'Donnell's. (*Laughs.*) Mavis always use to say to me that I could fall in shit, and come out smelling of roses.

Anyhow. Johno just laughed at me. I mean look, Prime Ministers have sat on this seat.

We worked on the roof of Magdalen too, and there is evidence. Proven in the first ever episode of *Inspector Morse* we're up there; Johnno and I. Apparently, we were being too loud. *Piss off*. I'm here to do a job; I will do that job however I want, and it will take me however long it takes me to do the job right. There is no other way, only Jacko's way.

My mates call me Jacko – like the character from *Brush Strokes*; my granddaughter seems to think I'm like Christopher Lloyd as Uncle Fester from the *Addams Family*. (*Laughs.*) Just when I thought life couldn't get better, and I get little Laura. My only grandchild; my little sweet. I take her everywhere with me and let her do whatever she wants. If she wants to stick pieces of paper on the wall. She can. If she wants to pin clothes pegs all over herself. She can. If she wants to make cupcakes, making a mess of the kitchen. She can.

He starts to cough into a tissue.

Takes a sip of tea.

Pause.

A good brew can solve anything – so long as you never have a tea, sugar or milk crisis. A digestive can always help too.

Takes another sip.

I could have been a teacher by profession. Was a teacher for a short while in the 70s. But money was in trade back then, not teaching; one of my few regrets in life. Teacher at Oxford Brookes I was. Woodwork. Obviously.

As a child I barely went to school. Had to have the local copper take me. Even then it was futile – I would just jump out the other

side of the car and run to the woods. Would much rather catch newts than be taught by Miss Rawlins. Got a thick ear of my dad once because of her – all I did was throw a shoe at her. (*Laughs.*) Although, it was a clog, and it knocked her glasses off. She deserved it. All I did was make a mess with the ink, and she sent me to the back of the class. She shouldn't have embarrassed me.

Go to black.

Come up on JACK standing in the garden, by a home-made vegetable patch and glass greenhouse. He is wearing a shirt and a pair of jeans. There is a cup of tea on the floor beside him and an ashtray. There is a faint sound of a radio in the background – Radio 2.

JACK is singing 'A Little Less Conversation' by Elvis Presley, which is playing on the radio.

A little less conversation, a little more action, please. All this aggravation ain't satisfactioning me. A little more bite and a little less bark, a little less fight and a little more spark. Close your mouth and open up your heart and, baby, satisfy me.

Pause.

Gardener. There's another trade. I love being outside in the fresh air. Grow me own veg. Always good for when there's a war on. I have a cupboard in my kitchen full of tin cans – Roo calls it the cupboard that time forgot. (*Laughs.*)

I golf too. Quite good, invested in some nice clubs. Good way to clear the mind is at the driving range.

Pause.

Got divorced when Roo was still young. Rose and I were much better as friends than we ever were as husband and wife. We still love each other, though – just as friends. Christ, the fights we could get into. I destroyed the kitchen I made her once. The kids trashed it the night before as there were no cupboard doors. She had a right go at me. So I smashed it up with a hammer. Her response, ‘the worktops were too high anyway.’

I still go round there frequently, and for Christmas dinner every year too; her second husband, Terry, and I get on very well. I’m happy for her.

Was in lodgings for years with mates after that: David, Tyrone, Rex... Was a right laugh, never a dull moment.

Had a whole in the fence of that house – it backed onto the Girl’s school – so obviously Roo used that to her advantage.

Pause. Sings again. ‘Choo Choo Ch’Boogie’ by Louis Jordan.

I made that greenhouse, and the shed – you can’t see that though. Might as well be a second house, the size it is. Equally as messy. I do most of my work in there.

Picks up some of the potatoes grown.

Can make a smashing roast with these.

Go to black.

Come up on JACK on a tall ship (museum). He is stood by the ship’s wheel on deck. He is reading an information card by the wheel – with a pair of reading glasses on the end of his nose, engrossed.

I go to the Elvis conventions a lot. Met some characters there. Great times. Appeared on the *James Whale Show* once because of it.

(Laughs.) I'm shocked we never got kicked out; we were all pissed as farts. I think there's a clip of it on YouTube somewhere. I highly recommend Presley's Bar on Tottenham Court Road too.

Looks back at the information card.

Knowledge. Learning. Isn't it amazing? I show my daughters and granddaughter all this. I take them everywhere. Such a good way to broaden the mind.

I took some night classes in the 90s. One in bookkeeping; one in navigation. Now that one came in useful.

I ended up watching this programme one day, 'wish you were here'. Showed the Jubilee Sailing Trust – tall ships, anyone can go. I mean anyone. Doesn't matter what age you are or whether you have any disabilities. Why not? I said. It'll be an adventure – it gave me a new lease of life. STS Lord Nelson was the ship – she is magnificent. I only meant to go on there for two weeks initially, but it turned into two months.

You see the Captain at the time, Ethel, locked himself in the bathroom. So, I being a carpenter by profession, had to break the door down for him, then reattach it. After all that palaver was over, they asked if I wanted to stay on board for a while as the ship's chippy. Unpaid; volunteering, but I get free board and travel. Of course I bloody well said yes to that.

Give me a week and I can look the part too. Grow a proper Captain Birdseye beard.

Grabs the Ship's wheel.

The bridge. Best place to be on a ship, after the bar of course. Being at the helm, holding a course. Feeling her move across the waves.

Watching the sails change. The Captain give orders. You will never feel more relaxed in your life.

Pause.

Got to go to the doctor tomorrow, my daughters insist.

Go to black.

Come up on JACK sat at a table in a pub with a glass of whiskey beside him. There is already a couple of empty pint glasses.

The Crown. Best working man's pub in town. Spent many an evening here. Drinking, chatting, singing.

I've had a good life. Few regrets. Very proud of what I've done with it.

Pause

Lung Cancer. That's what the doctor said, probably from the asbestos back in the day. Terminal. I'll fight it; don't you worry about that. I refuse to leave this world before I see my family right.

The life of the party, that's what I am. I would always dance in the middle with the rest dancing in a circle around me, altogether. And that will never change. Not if I can help it.

I've lived the life of Riley, haven't I?

JACK walks off laughing to his mates. Fade out to 'Unforgettable' by Nat King Cole.

LUCAS MELO BRAGA

Trading Places

EXT. LONDON STOCK EXCHANGE — AFTERNOON

A ground-level view of the London Stock Exchange building displays its white exterior, which almost glows in contrast with the greyness of the day. Dark clouds loom in the sky.

INT. LONDON STOCK EXCHANGE (GROUND
FLOOR) — CONTINUOUS

Glass panels on all floors surround the bowels of the place: a decoration made of differently coloured circles that are falling, but also frozen in place. The sound of lift doors opening and closing are heard, followed by a very loud mechanical bang.

INT. LIFT (INSIDE LONDON STOCK
EXCHANGE) — CONTINUOUS

As the lift gets stuck, a MAN, 38, and a WOMAN, 31, struggle to find balance. They are both well-dressed in suits, but the woman has her jacket folded and is holding it close to herself. They stare at one another.

MAN You alright?

WOMAN I guess.

The MAN appears to be calm enough as he turns to the button panel. The WOMAN, jittery, remains pressed against one corner. She guards her jacket with her arms closed, as if caring for a baby, and leans against the side mirror.

WOMAN Is there a button to call for help or something?

The MAN checks: of course there is such a button, but he never presses it, instead choosing to tap an area of the panel where there are no buttons. His back is turned to the WOMAN, who can't see what he is doing.

MAN There's a little yellow bell. Doesn't seem to be working, though.

WOMAN Brilliant. Just brilliant.

MAN We're not squashed in the basement floor at least.

They remain silent for a couple of seconds, the WOMAN still guarding her jacket, looking all around lift. She avoids eye contact with the MAN, who still has an eerie tranquility about him.

WOMAN Should we just scream for help? People were screaming out there just now, though, so I don't know. The place is crazy today.

MAN Not sure, I guess someone will need the lift at some point.

The MAN sits down, with the WOMAN looking at him as if in reproach. He has a slight smile on his face.

MAN What? Might as well relax.

Silence creeps in. The MAN fixates his eyes on the doors of the lift and stretches his neck. The WOMAN remains in her corner, shifting her legs inadvertently.

The MAN taps with his fingers against one of the sides of the lift in a rhythm. He keeps this going for a bit before stopping and directing his sights at the WOMAN. His eyes stop on her jacket for a moment.

MAN Here's a thought. Why not use your phone?

WOMAN Huh. Yeah, that's... oh, my signal is not great. Here, I mean.

The MAN keeps his eyes fixated on the jacket. The WOMAN seems to notice and moves her arms carefully, trying to make sure it's even better protected. As she does this, the MAN checks the mirror for a split second. He grins.

MAN Well, no reason not to try, right?

WOMAN Can't you get yours?

MAN Oh, I don't actually have a phone.

WOMAN What do you mean you don't have a phone?

MAN I don't. Never use them. Well, sometimes for work, depending on the situation, but I don't have one on me.

WOMAN Who doesn't own a phone in this day and age?

MAN Me.

WOMAN That's... odd. First time I've heard that, even my 6-year-old nephew has one.

MAN Kids these days, they get out of the womb with the stuff, it's crazy. But yes, feel free to check your signal.

The WOMAN opens her mouth, then closes it without saying anything. The MAN glances at the jacket again.

MAN No reason not to at least check, right?

WOMAN Yeah. Of course. No reason not to.

The WOMAN begins to untangle her arms, trying to be as delicate as possible with her jacket, but her nervousness prevents her from being in full control.

MAN You alright?

WOMAN I'm fine. I—

The WOMAN fumbles around with the jacket, trying to find her phone. Then, she turns her head down in shock as a SMALL PISTOL falls from the jacket, almost

as if in slow motion. It drops in the center of the lift and the WOMAN stares at the MAN. . . Who is still unfazed.

MAN A Ruger. That's grand. Is it loaded?

The WOMAN tries to catch her breath, unable to talk.

WOMAN I—

The MAN grabs the pistol and removes its bullets without much effort: there are only two. He places the gun back in the center of the lift, then collects the bullets, setting them side by side.

MAN Two bullets. Why not six? There's room for six.

WOMAN Ah, I don't—

MAN There's no way you just fired three bullets, so you must have loaded only two to begin with. Why just the two?

WOMAN Who says I didn't just shoot them?

MAN The gun is cold. Hasn't been fired in a while, if ever, because it also looks brand new.

The WOMAN stops talking and bites her own lips. The MAN turns the gun around in his hand.

WOMAN Whatever. Did you know I had a gun beforehand? The way you were staring—

MAN I used my astonishing powers of deduction. Also, you moved and I could see a glint in the mirror there.

The WOMAN starts laughing, while the MAN continues to smile.

MAN Why not load six bullets?

WOMAN I wasn't killing six people.

MAN You were killing two?

WOMAN No! Just... just one.

MAN Why not one bullet?

WOMAN I don't know, it's weird having just one. What if I miss the shot? Still doesn't mean I need six. What's it to you? What are these questions, anyway?

MAN We're stuck here, might as well talk. You brought an elephant to the room. It's narrow enough in here, you know?

WOMAN You knew I was hiding something before you could see anything. You were staring at me. Since you're so clever, what did you think it was?

MAN A dildo is what first came to mind.

Both of them laugh at the comment, the WOMAN finally appearing to be less tense.

MAN I don't know. Drugs? You would have that in your pocket, though. Unless it's a whole gram. But that would be weird.

WOMAN Not that weird here, let me tell you.

MAN Please do.

WOMAN You don't work here. I've never seen you before.

MAN No, just visiting. You could think of me as a consultant. Sort of.

WOMAN Nice to meet you, consultant of sorts. Wish it were under better circumstances.

MAN I take it you didn't use that pistol at all. Did you point it at the guy? Is that why people were running around like mad up there?

WOMAN I didn't point it. I had it, but I did nothing, I swear. Ah, this is bonkers. Why am I telling you this?

MAN Think of me as a confessional priest. Or a lawyer, if you prefer.

WOMAN Are you actually a lawyer?

MAN No. I did study law, though. Just went into other endeavours.

WOMAN Have you ever practised law? Can I pay you, and like, tell you things?

MAN That's a good question. I don't know. I don't figure you look guilty.

WOMAN Fucking hell. Maybe I can trust you.

MAN Who is this man, worthy of one or two bullets?

WOMAN He works here with me, we are both traders. We had a thing over a year ago, but it ended as soon as it began. That isn't the issue.

MAN What's the issue?

WOMAN He... Let's say he is... He had access to—

MAN He has some dirt on you. How bad?

WOMAN You don't miss a thing, do you? Yes, he has some dirt on me, about the trading. It's... bad news.

MAN Two-bullet-type bad news?

WOMAN Serious-prison-time-type bad news.

MAN Fuck.

A brief moment of silence. The WOMAN, teary-eyed, looks at the gun. The MAN digs a napkin out of his pocket — in doing so, a phone leaps out, but he tucks it back in before the WOMAN can see. She observes herself in the mirror.

WOMAN I don't even recognise myself. What am I doing, walking in there with a gun? Nothing makes sense anymore. It's not healthy.

MAN It's not you.

The MAN turns his head to the mirror as well, gazing at his reflection.

WOMAN I just feel worthless.

MAN But you didn't go through with it. No one saw the gun, right?

WOMAN Just you.

MAN And I'm alright.

The MAN smiles from ear to ear. The WOMAN lets out a stifled laugh.

MAN You'll be fine. Look at the bright side: you didn't do it.

I'm assuming you didn't have much in the way of a plan, right?

These things are loud, you know.

WOMAN The only thing I know is that I'm desperate to avoid jail.

MAN You froze. That's your mind's way of protecting you from the hell you were about to get into. And clearly this lift wouldn't have been much of an escape.

WOMAN I'm sure the bloody version of me would've seemed a lot more guilty.

MAN I'd say blood on your hands doesn't always mean they're dripping.

They both lose the eye contact with their reflections in the mirror and stop talking. The WOMAN looks up again. The MAN closes his eyes and caresses them with his fingers.

MAN What was all that going on upstairs anyway, the running around? Is that what a normal day is like here?

WOMAN I don't know. They were coming from another floor, I wasn't there and, of course, wasn't preoccupied. It's madness in general, but nothing like that. I've never seen that, it was a bloody stampede.

MAN You bet.

WOMAN You weren't there?

MAN Oh, I was higher up.

WOMAN Why would you be consulting higher up? It's like a dead end in there.

MAN Yeah. Still, that's where they told me to go, so that's where I went.

WOMAN What do you consult on?

MAN It varies. No two days are the same, just how I like it. Don't want to bore you with the details.

The MAN glances at his reflection again, with a light smile.

WOMAN After all I just told you? Come on, humour someone who will be behind bars soon.

MAN Well, let's just say I bring light to people's portfolios.

WOMAN Light?

MAN I'm provide adjustments as a response to certain investments. It's not all that, I promise.

After more silence, the WOMAN has a lightbulb moment: her facial expression is one of excitement. She reaches for her jacket with newfound resolve and grabs her phone.

MAN I thought signal was terrible here.

WOMAN It is, that wasn't all crap. But still, no reason not to try.

MAN (*quietly*) No reason not to try.

The WOMAN holds her phone overhead, moving it side to side in an attempt to improve her signal bars. Her movements cause a bit of a wobble in the lift. Then, another mechanical sound can be heard, after which the lift starts working again.

The MAN sbrugs and stands up, retrieving the pistol and the bullets and giving them back to the WOMAN, who hides everything again. The lift descends. The WOMAN's phone vibrates and she starts using it. The MAN is now dead serious: his mouth twitches.

WOMAN Got a few texts, seems people missed me. Hey, why don't you wait for me outside?

MAN Sure. And don't forget: you didn't go through with it.

INT. LONDON STOCK EXCHANGE (GROUND
FLOOR) – CONTINUOUS

The lift doors open. A RECEPTIONIST, 34, is on the other side, beaming at them.

RECEPTIONIST Hello there, sir, miss. We have been experiencing problems with the lift this week, my apologies for the distress. This has been reported, and it will be out of commission until repairs are made.

As the receptionist walks away, the MAN glances at himself in the mirror and smiles before the lift doors close. He walks past the WOMAN, who has stopped dead in her tracks, tapping her screen hurriedly to play a video.

REPORTER (phone in) We are live from London's Paternoster Square as police gathers in front of the Stock Exchange building following reports of the murders of at least three employees. The suspect is believed to be a 39-year-old male with possible ties to a criminal organisation, who would've—

The WOMAN gawks at her phone in shock. She moves towards the entrance and looks outside. The MAN's silhouette kneels down as the police surrounds him.

J.T. MULHOLLAND

Almost Who

CAST LIST

TREVOR BARKER	<i>An old, bitter actor</i>
BERNICE	<i>Someone from Trevor's past</i>
BARTENDER	<i>A listener</i>

LONDON BAR, GREENWICH, CLOSING TIME.

TREVOR BARKER (79) sitting at the bar with a full glass and a bottle of rum. Behind the barstool, the BARTENDER is drying some glass mugs.

BARTENDER Did the recording go well today Mr Barker?

TREVOR Usual session, old chap, one of those 'podcast' dramas.

BARTENDER Wasn't it a *Doctor Who* audio or something?

TREVOR Yes, Tom Baker's in it and I played a baddie.

BARTENDER Sounds fun.

TREVOR I should never have become an actor.

BARTENDER What do you mean Trevor?

TREVOR I'm not very good at it for a start.

BARTENDER You're joking, Trevor, you've appeared in tons of TV shows, not many people can say that.

TREVOR Doesn't mean I'm any good you know. I mean, these days talent isn't a requirement, keep in mind that Keith Bloody Lemons got his own show.

TREVOR has a drink. He pours himself another glass.

TREVOR Besides, most of the time I'm not even the lead.

BARTENDER It doesn't matter, you're still a TV star.

TREVOR Always as the spear carrier, never the star.

BARTENDER You played that baddie in the *Doctor Who* audio.

TREVOR Isn't going to win me any Bafta's you know.

BARTENDER Trevor, no one really cares about the Bafta's.

TREVOR You're just trying to be nice.

BARTENDER Seriously, most of the award winning dramas are either wet grass period pieces or the umpteenth crime drama of the week, it's predictable.

TREVOR But they're winners, nonetheless.

BARTENDER Cheer up Trevor, life is depressing enough as it is.

TREVOR My life is depressing. God, mother was right. I should never have become an actor.

BARTENDER Trevor, you've been in tons of TV shows. *Juliet Bravo*, *The Tomorrow People*, *Tales of the Unexpected*. You've worked with so many great actors. You've got tons of stories to tell, everyone loves hearing your stories.

TREVOR picks up his glass and looks at it.

TREVOR You know, I almost played The Doctor.

BARTENDER Really?

TREVOR Yes. You see, during the late seventies, either the Beeb or Tom wanted to move on and for a brief period they were auditioning actors for the role. My agent encouraged me to give it a go.

BARTENDER How did the audition go?

TREVOR They loved it, said I was just who they were looking for. Similar to Tom Baker but different enough. Following week

they fitted me for a costume, it looked similar to The Joker's from *Batman*. The Adam West one.

BARTENDER So what happened?

TREVOR Someone changed their mind at the last minute, can't remember who. Whatever the reason, Tom was still The Doctor and I became nothing but a brief footnote and curiosity in *Doctor Who* history.

TREVOR drinks.

TREVOR Ironically, I was cast as an extra in one of Tom's stories. 'Destiny of The Daleks' or something.

BARTENDER Cheer up Trevor, you were almost Doctor Who. Not many actors can say that.

TREVOR pours himself another drink.

TREVOR That's what fans call me, The Almost Doctor. I've played Macbeth, Herod, Richard the Third. I've even played Silly Bloody Billy in that Jack in the Beanstalk pantomime.

BARTENDER Jack and the Beanstalk.

TREVOR Say what?

BARTENDER Jack and the Beanstalk.

TREVOR What of it?

BARTENDER You said Jack in the Beanstalk when it's called Jack and the Beanstalk.

TREVOR Jack in the Beanstalk, Jack and the Beanstalk. Does it really matter what it's called? Jack's bloody climbing up it, he's going high places while I'm stuck here.

TREVOR has a drink. He pours himself another.

TREVOR Anyway, my point is people only know me as that chap who almost played The Doctor. I mean, is that all I'm going to be remembered for? Someone who almost became a household name, someone who almost became something.

BERNICE (29) enters the pub.

BARTENDER I'm afraid we're closing.

BERNICE I won't be long; I've come to see him.

TREVOR Bloody fans! Look here, I've had it with all these bloody questions. Yes, I was almost Doctor Bloody Who. But that's more than you'll ever bloody achieve in your bloody miserable...

TREVOR turns to face.

TREVOR Have we met before?

BERNICE Don't you remember me?

TREVOR Should I?

BERNICE You really don't remember me, do you?

TREVOR I've known lots of ladies in my time and I think it's safe to assume that we never...

BERNICE It's me, Dad.

TREVOR gets up from his stool and slowly walks over to BERNICE.

TREVOR Benny?

BERNICE I wasn't sure if you'd recognised me.

TREVOR My little Bernice! Benny, my Benny.

TREVOR tries to hug BERNICE, but she steps back.

TREVOR What's the matter?

BERNICE It's been over twenty years Dad, twenty years.

BARTENDER Anything I can get you miss?

BERNICE looks over at the BARTENDER.

BERNICE I'm fine thank you; I just want to talk to my Dad.

TREVOR Bernice, you need to understand, I never intended...

BERNICE Twenty years since you left us.

There is an awkward silence in the room.

BARTENDER I think I better give you two some space, I'll be round back.

BARTENDER exits.

TREVOR I went off to create a better life for us, everything I did,
I did for you and your mother.

BERNICE You abandoned us, you left us alone, you—

TREVOR I did not! I always sent you money, I sent you tapes.

BERNICE You left without warning, Mum thought you'd abandoned
us, that you'd gone off with another woman or killed yourself.

TREVOR I wrote a letter to your mother, I told her that I was
filming that French soap opera, *La Bleue Chatte Chateau*, I was the
British character, Rupert.

BERNICE I know, you always sent us those VHS tapes.

TREVOR Oh yes, I remember, I think they were Betamax.

BERNICE Is that what bothers you, what tape you used.

TREVOR Benny, you know how pleased I am to see you.

BERNICE Really, a few moments ago you didn't even know who
I was.

TREVOR An honest mistake Benny, I'm only human you know.

BERNICE Look Dad, just... it's been a long time, it's just.

TREVOR Just what?

BERNICE I imagined our reunion playing out... I didn't imagine it being like this.

TREVOR Like what?

BERNICE (shouts) This!

TREVOR What do you mean, This?

BERNICE Meeting up in some backwater pub in Greenwich. I guess I imagined you coming home, flowers in hand, Mum running up to kiss you, myself running up to hug you, it's stupid, I know.

TREVOR No it's not. Benny, I know this isn't the reunion you imagined, but I'm here now. From now on, it's only going to be us two, just us, nothing matters now that we're together—

BERNICE (recites) My life, my future. I know it's going to be much brighter with you in it.

BENNY steps away from TREVOR.

TREVOR Have I done something wrong?

BERNICE That's from one of your bloody shows, *Juliet Bravo*.

TREVOR Was it?

BERNICE (shouts) Yes! Line for line.

TREVOR I didn't know Benny. I must have forgotten, but I meant every word, you know how pleased I am to see you.

BERNICE Are you?

TREVOR Yes. Benny, let's not start a fight, it's the first time I've seen you in years, come on, let's go back to my place, eh, we'll have lots to catch up on. You still love spaghetti, am I right?

BERNICE Of course Dad.

TREVOR Well, what are we waiting for.

TREVOR runs back to bar table; he leaves some money on there.

TREVOR (shouts) Going out now, I've left money on the table.

BERNICE and TREVOR are about to leave together.

TREVOR All those years I've been away, why didn't you ever write to me Benny?

BERNICE I did, when I turned eight, I wrote to you every holiday.

TREVOR You did?

BERNICE Yes, didn't you get them?

TREVOR Your letters? Of course, I remember now, I remember getting your letters.

BERNICE steps away from TREVOR.

BERNICE But... you never replied.

TREVOR Well... I'm a busy man Benny, one acting gig follows another, after filming parties, social events, that sort of thing. This job eats up most of my time.

BERNICE And yet you always make time for the pub.

BERNICE sits down at a table. TREVOR is about to join her.

BERNICE I'd prefer to sit alone.

Bernice looks at Trevor, there is an awkward silence.

BERNICE I don't know why I bothered, why I tried.

TREVOR Benny, look, we got off to a bad start, let's sit down and...

BERNICE I remember there were a few Christmases and Birthdays when I hoped you'd come back, or at the very least pay me a visit, I remember crying my eyes out when you failed to show up.

TREVOR I'm sorry Benny.

BERNICE No worries, I gave up after a while.

TREVOR Then why? Why go through all this effort to find me?

BERNICE pulls out a letter and hands it to TREVOR, he reads it. He looks at BERNICE.

TREVOR Joanne... Your Mother. Benny, I'm...

BERNICE For a while I blamed Mum, I thought she drove you off. For years I secretly wanted her dead... and now...

BERNICE gets up, she is about to leave.

BERNICE I should ask you to come, but do you really care?

TREVOR is silent, BERNICE leaves. The BARTENDER enters. He looks around, then he looks at TREVOR.

BARTENDER I think you should go home now, Mr Barker.

TREVOR walks back to the barstool; he holds his glass. He looks at it.

TREVOR I am home.


TREVOR has a drink.

V. NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

SUMIAYA AHMED is a Muslim, sex-positive freelance writer, poet and book reviewer, aiming to break down the boundaries of cultural stigma and shame attached to mental health and sexuality within the South Asian culture, and bringing marginalised topics to light. She currently studies English Literature with Creative Writing and has published two poetry collections of her own.


MAHIMA ANJUM is currently in her final year of her Creative Writing (BA) degree. She is a 22-year-old student who was born and raised in London. Mahima enjoys writing poems about love, heartbreak and everyday life. She draws inspiration from her experiences, from the people she has met and also the problems others have endured. She believes poetry is both a tool for self-expression and an escape from reality. Mahima hopes that her words will inspire others to articulate their own experiences through poetry.

BENEDICT LUCAS ASHMORE (Benny) is a third year undergraduate Creative Writing student who spent a decade sub-level working for London Underground and agitating for worker's rights, before




embarking on a mid-life crisis and returning to studenthood after a thirteen-year hiatus. He is a disabled autistic non-binary trans man with a Dad sense of humour and a fascination with the natural world, especially as it interacts with the built environment and human industry. He is currently working on a final year poetry project exploring the endangered language Occitan and his family connections to southern France.

AATIKA AYOUB is a third-year BA History and Politics student at the University of Greenwich. London-born, Dubai-bred, Doha-based and of Sudanese extraction, she feels herself to be a third-culture kid through-and-through. When she's not working on her degree, you could find her writing, reading, pouring over cat memes, or watching some British comedy classics.



SHAUN BARNES is a part-time Creative Writing and English Literature student with a penchant for science fiction and gothic fantasy. He cites Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as being his all-time favourite novel that had a massive influence on his own writing. He also enjoys the works of Neil Gaiman, Terry Pratchett, and Douglas Adams for their tongue-in-cheek humour and sardonic wit. In his spare time he enjoys blogging, playing video games, and crossdressing. Shaun is openly and unashamedly bisexual, and is incredibly vocal about the need for more diversity and inclusivity in genre fiction.



ZOË BARRY is in her second year at Greenwich, studying for a BA hons in English Literature. She started writing poetry when she was around 7- or 8-years-old, but has really begun to find her own style in the last year or two – quarantine was good for some things! Her





main poetic influences are the Victorian poets, Christina Rossetti and Robert Browning. She particularly admires Browning's uses of voice, and his ability to develop intense characterisation, in even his shorter poems. Zoë has never shared her poetry publicly before, but she continues to develop her own poetic style and voice, and hopes to keep improving with practice.

ALYCIA BELL is third year student at the University of Greenwich and is now twice published in the anthology. She is currently studying Creative Writing and English Literature, socially distanced, with the convenient use of Teams. Once a novice to poetry, Alycia has found endless inspiration in her degree that has spurred a passion for the form. You will most likely find her enthralled in the obscure works of Paul Celan or trying to work out the syllables of a line. She dedicates this year's work to Gary Hilden – a man so incredibly missed by all; loved by so many.

MARIE BERNHARD grew up in Hamburg, Germany and moved to London at age 18, where she is currently in her third year studying Creative Writing and English Literature at the University of Greenwich. Marie started creating stories at a young age and decided to do a degree in writing to pursue her dreams of becoming an author.

ANNE BLOMBACH is in her final year of Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. When she is not studying, she works as the president of the Feminism Society and Editor at the student website The Crow's Nest. She draws her main inspiration from women writers, such as Amanda Lovelace, Charly Cox and Olivia Gatwood, examining themes of mental illness, relationships and



feminism in her works. Poetry is her preferred genre to write in, however, she also enjoys fiction and journalistic writing.

GEMMA BORDA is a Hungarian first year English Literature student and aspiring secondary teacher. She's lived in England since she was nine-years-old, growing up in England and embracing England and the English culture as her own. Aside from her passion for writing, she loves making music on her ukulele and her bass guitar, previously being part of her church band for some years. However, not everything is creative for her, as she participates in boxing. These varied interests inspire different genres of writing, but mainly she enjoys writing adventure stories with a deeper meaning that she hopes to convey.

RYAN BRYCE is a mid-twenties contemporary poet and spoken word artist. Having graduated from BA (Hons) Creative Writing and English Literature at Greenwich in 2020, they are now off becoming an 'upstanding member of society' by training as a college lecturer. They helped curate the 2020 edition of the Greenwich Anthology; this is their fourth appearance in the publication. Originally from a sleepy town in east Northamptonshire, they continue to shout poetry and far-fetched proverbs at anyone who listens, usually with a cigarette and glass of rose wine in hand.

SAMANTHA BURTON is in her first year at Greenwich University studying Creative Writing and English Literature. She has always been passionate about reading and writing and devours novels on a regular basis. She has always had a creative imagination and is constantly lost in the world of fantasy. She has studied martial arts since the age of six and achieved her Black Belt in Shotokan

Karate at age 11 and her Second Dan at age 14. Samantha has never published any work before. All typos in her work are accredited to her cat, who jumps on her keyboard.

NICOLE BUTLER is a third year creative writing student at the University of Greenwich, where she also studies mandarin. This is her second year of being published in the anthology. Nicole spends a lot of her time reading the newest released novels and poetry collections and even has her own blog titled 'Confessions of a reading freak' where she posts a mix of reviews, her own creative work and her opinions of all things regarding books. After graduation, Nicole plans to explore the world of publishing.


EMILY CASTELINO is a third year mature English Literature student at the University of Greenwich. This is her first short story to be published after taking a Creative Writing course last year. She is due to undertake a PGCE to become a teacher after graduating and hopes to inspire children with the same love of reading and writing that she has. She would like to thank her brother, Robert Castelino, for providing the idea that the story blossomed from, and Kayleigh James for providing caffeinated drinks that got her through the Friday Creative Writing lessons!

REBECCA CAVANAGH is a third-year creative writing student and this is her first piece of published work. She currently works at her old secondary school as a sports coach, but beyond that, has no idea what lies for her career-wise. The main aspiration is to be a professional writer. In her spare time, Rebecca can be found painting and drawing even if the results aren't always fruitful.

ZARIN CHOUDHURY was born in London. She is currently enrolled at Greenwich University as a second-year student, studying English Literature. She aims to get her degree and pursue writing as a career, aspiring to be a successful author. Writing has always been significant and consistent in Zarin's life. She thinks of it as imprinting art that's expressed in the form of well-written thoughts. She believes it's not only a way to escape or create a fantasy world, it's a way of expressing individuality, fabricating something special with imagination and prominent past experiences.



OLIVIA CORLEY is a third year English Literature student at the University of Greenwich. Her love for English flourished at a very young age, and she has adored literature ever since. Olivia was first published by Young Writers when she was eight years old in a poetry anthology, followed by another poetry anthology a year later. Last year, Olivia's collaborative piece was published by the University for the BLTI9 project; her piece focuses on trade periodicals in the nineteenth century and its evolution. Olivia is planning to go on to do a masters in English Literature after she graduates.

LILY DENT. From a young age Lily struggled with reading and writing, her lack of confidence continued through her education until taught by an inspiring teacher, which then helped her to excel in her higher education study of literature. Now as a young adult, Lily has begun her undergraduate studies in English Literature with Creative Writing, in order to continue her found passion for the literary arts. Within this 2021 Greenwich Anthology edition is her first published works of poetry. Lily's hopes are that there will be more yet to come.



ROBYN DEVON is a third year Creative Writing student at the University of Greenwich. Normally, Robyn is cabin crew, however the pandemic has found her working at a COVID-19 vaccination centre in administration, where her creative writing studies have at least been useful for writing killer e-mails. Robyn continues to work on her first novel, which with any luck should be available to read by 2089.

CORINA DUMA is a third year BA Creative Writing student who has compiled her best work during her time at the University of Greenwich. She enjoys writing poetry with surrealist undertones as well as poems that evoke themes of everyday life. Her fiction is grounded in realist themes; she much prefers historic fiction and stories that end horrifically. She has been involved in the editing of this anthology collection and hopes to do a lot more editing professionally in the future.



LAURA EVANS comes from the town of Didcot, Oxfordshire. She is currently in her first year studying Creative Writing and English Literature at Greenwich. This is her first piece of published work. When not reading from her substantial book collection, which she has no room for, but continues to add to, Laura can be found at the theatre or cinema. In the future, she would like to write for the film and theatre industries. Most of Laura's inspiration comes from her family, whom she loves greatly. Her grandfathers appear in everything she does and writes in some form or another.


REBECCA FILSELL is a second year English Literature with Creative Writing student originally from London. Inspired by everyday human nature and our environment, her poems capture new

observations of the world we can take for granted. Using writing as a release, it helps her to stay grounded, organise thoughts, and stay connected to nature's calming presence. She finds that reading and writing poetry reminds her that the darkest days can always reveal some beauty, and she aspires to continue to encapsulate those beautiful and heart-breaking moments in words.

EMILY FISHER is a second year English Literature and Creative Writing student at the University of Greenwich, London. The most recent publications of her work can be found in Havik journal and Dreich chapbooks, in addition to the 2019 Greenwich Anthology. Inspired by both classic and contemporary poets alike, Emily infuses her modern poetry with emotion through nature and is most drawn to exploring the darker shadows of human life, including her own.


ALEKSANDRA GATZ, usually known as Ola, moved to London in 2018 to study Sociology and Psychology. Now, she is finishing her final year and cannot imagine living anywhere else. London, especially Greenwich, feels like home to her. She started writing poems as a hobby but with time she noticed it also had a very therapeutic effect and helped her deal with lots of emotions. As a child, it was her dream to become a published writer, so she feels incredibly happy to somehow fulfil that ambition. Ola is honoured to be a part of the 2021 Anthology, as well as last year's 2020 Anthology.

NAOMI GREEN is a third year Creative Writing student at the University of Greenwich. She was born and raised in Derby but moved to London three years ago. Her passion is poetry and after completing her degree, she hopes to publish her collections. This writing centres around self-discovery, dreams and memories. She




also writes songs in her spare time and plans to make a body of musical work soon. Naomi enjoys deep conversations and likes making short films celebrating life's moments.

KAYLEIGH JAMES is a third year English Literature student at the University of Greenwich. She lives in London with her husband George, two children, Oscar and Robyn, and her dog called Millie-moo-moo. Kayleigh has become an avid writer over the last ten years and co-runs the Greenwich Writers'; a society which meet for critiquing sessions weekly, as well as arranging agent and author evenings. Kayleigh is a passionate about art, and spends most of her free time creating glass, crystal and wire suncatchers.



LAUREN JOHNSON is nineteen years old and currently studying for an English Literature degree. Her poem is inspired by the world around us, showcasing the way each season re-designs it in its own unique and mesmerising way. Her poem has elements of realism portrayed fantastically. Her favourite genres of literature are ones that encapsulate both reality and escape for its readers. When she graduate, her hopes are to become an English teacher, but endeavours to continue her writing alongside her career. She has found a passion for writing, which she wishes to continue throughout her life.



KYRA KRUK is a Chicago-born London-dweller, studying English at the University of Greenwich. She enjoys writing all sorts of nonsense, pondering life's confusions, struggling to climb up mountains, eating plants and petting animals. In the future, she hopes to majorly change the world (like every other university student).

NELE LEITOLF is a 24-year-old student of English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. In her poetry, she examines themes of feminism, mental health, interpersonal relationships and politics. Her main influences are Sylvia Plath, Ingeborg Bachman, Joan Didion and Ocean Vuong. She is a recipient of one of the In-Words Poetry Prizes 2020, judged by Sasha Akhtar. Apart from poetry, Nele is mostly interested in writing plays and short fiction.

LUCAS MELO BRAGA is a final year creative writing student at the University of Greenwich. He was born in Brazil, raised in Spain, and now lives in England. He is passionate about the art of storytelling and aims to get involved with writing and other creative projects.

JAMES TIMOTHY MULHOLLAND is a 24-year-old third year university student. He studies BA Creative Writing and English Literature. James has Autism Spectrum Disorder, a lifelong condition that affects how his brain processes information. Despite this, James has a love for storytelling, his interests include writing short stories and reading Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels. James believes that his autism provides him a unique perspective on life, that it gives him the ability to view the world through another lens. James's short stories and poems usually focus on themes of surrealism, social commentary and draw inspiration from myths and legends.

EMILIJA PAULAUŠKAITE is a third year English Literature student at the University of Greenwich. Over the years, writing poetry has become an important part of her daily routine. Moving into the city of London has only inspired her to write more than ever before. This is her second time to be published in the Greenwich

Anthology, featuring some of the poetry which she wrote on rainy days spent at London cafes.

ALICE PETERS is a second-year English language and literature student with a passion for languages and teaching; this is her first published poem. In the future she aims for a career in teaching English as a foreign language, before getting a master's degree in speech pathology in order to become a certified speech therapist. She loves to hike, particularly in the mountains of the Lake District where she is from, and enjoys travelling, exploring new places, and meeting new people.


MILLS PORTER is a 20-year-old student living in London and are currently in their second year of studying drama. Mills is agender and use the pronouns they/them. As well as this, they are demi-sexual, autistic, diabetic and have ADHD. As a neurodivergent individual with a different perspective on relationships they find poetry to be an effective form to show their experiences in love. Mills doesn't write very often they do enjoy it as they believe that when you understand the complexities of yourself it is nice to break it down into simple experiences. In the future, they aim to get involved in the acting industry in some way.

SAMANTHA RAINSBURY is a third year English Literature Student with a flair for contemporary poetry. The written word has always comforted Samantha, with its ability to transform transience to permanence, and create meaning from chaos. So, Samantha's poetry is often written through reflection of her own emotional experiences and memories. Thus, Samantha particularly considers the idea of self, and how this affects external relationships.


HOLLY ROFF is a second-year student studying English Literature with Creative Writing. She began reading avidly at the age of five and began creating her first stories around the same time. Her passion for reading everything she could get her hands on, and writing anything that came to mind, has continued to grow. She hopes to take this passion into her future career in the publishing industry and dreams of one day publishing her own novel from one of the many unfinished manuscripts on her laptop!

GEORGIA ROWE is a mature student raised in Wellingborough, Northamptonshire. After leaving school at 16, she took a break from education and moved north to Sheffield, South Yorkshire. There she attended The Sheffield College, and completed an Access to Higher Education course at distinction level, focussing on History and English. Since joining the university she has spent time living in both Barcelona and London. Recently, Georgia has begun to specialise in poetry, but continues to write in varying forms, including creative non-fiction and literary fiction. Georgia's work tends to focus on her ever-fluctuating experiences as a working-class young woman.


MARIANA SANTOS PINHO is a 23-year-old proud Portuguese student who is currently studying her final year of BA Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. She came to London to pursue her dream of writing. Most of her poetry reflects controversial subjects that she wants people to identify with and understand, whilst her prose mainly explores fictional realms. She hopes to be creative and original, but most importantly, she aims to reach out and connect with people. This is her second published work.



ELIE SHARP is an American student finishing her Bachelor degree in Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. Her writing focuses on world religion, American politics, mythology, and how these topics influence personal mental health. She strives to showcase sociological connections that may otherwise be neglected. In the world of prose, Elie focuses on young adult fantasy novels to explore the ‘what-ifs’ beyond our world. Elie’s goals for the future are to have her own poetry collections published and to inspire new writers to share their own vibrant voices.




TIERNEY ISOBEL SHAVE is a third year university student, currently completing her studies in History and English Literature. She aspires to travel to Japan where she wants to pursue a career in teaching English as a Foreign Language. This is the second time that Tierney has been published by the university, the first time being the BLT19 project – a collaborative piece that focused on nineteenth century periodicals and work ethics. Tierney’s poem focuses on her grandparents that she has sadly lost in recent years, and the impact that they had on her life.



CAITLIN SIEBEL is a Malaysian born creative writing student. Their work is mostly inspired by old films, the golden age of Hollywood, and pieces of art they find fascinating. They are currently in their second year at university and aspire to become a prolific screenwriter.

SUNZIDA UDDIN is a 20-year-old second-year BA Creative Writing student at Greenwich. In her free time, she is an amateur freelance artist and writer. She frequently enjoys researching trivia and is currently working on her carpentry skills. She loves to daydream and her fashion taste is eccentric, much to the disapproval of



everyone else. Her favourite genres are psychological horror, dark fantasy, gothic horror and anything to do with romanticism. That being said, she does have a penchant for anything cute and fluffy.

PIPPA VECK is a third year Creative Writing student at Greenwich, and was previously published in last year's anthology. Her writing centres around dark themes, such as unrequited love, mental health, and the struggle for identity in a superficial society; in the hope to shine a light on the uglier, and realer side of life, as well as to be a voice for the voiceless. Pippa's goal for the future is to have a fully published portfolio of her work, to inspire the next generation to fall in love with poetry.