

ANTHOLOGY

2024

Creative writing from
the University of Greenwich

edited by

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I. INTRODUCTION

'Write an introduction to an anthology written by students at Greenwich university. It contains poetry, prose, and scripts. Its title is Greenwich Anthology 2024'

Welcome to the enchanting world of words crafted by the creative minds of Greenwich University students. We proudly present to you the 'Greenwich Anthology 2024', a captivating collection that transcends the boundaries of imagination and explores the myriad facets of human expression. Within the pages of this anthology, you will discover a rich tapestry of poetry, prose, and scripts, each piece a testament to the diverse talents and unique perspectives of our contributors.

As the beating heart of this esteemed institution, Greenwich University has nurtured a community of thinkers, dreamers, and storytellers who have fearlessly ventured into the realms of creativity. This anthology serves as a showcase of their literary prowess, offering a glimpse into the vibrant minds that make up the dynamic tapestry of our university.

Journey through the verses that dance with rhythm and emotion, delve into prose that weaves intricate tales of life

and its complexities, and immerse yourself in scripts that bring characters to life on the stage of your imagination. The Greenwich Anthology 2024 is a celebration of the written word and the boundless possibilities it holds.

Within these pages, you will find a kaleidoscope of voices, themes, and genres, reflecting the diversity of our student body. Each contribution is a brushstroke on the canvas of this literary masterpiece, collectively creating an anthology that is as varied and vibrant as the university that inspired it.

So, dear reader, prepare to embark on a literary odyssey through the minds of Greenwich University students. Let the words within these pages transport you to worlds unknown, stir your emotions, and leave an indelible mark on your soul. Welcome to the Greenwich Anthology 2024 – a testament to the power of words and the limitless imagination of our students.

‘Write it as a poem’

In the shadows of Greenwich’s towers tall,
Where dreams are whispered through ivy-clad walls,
A chorus of voices, a creative spree,
Awakens the pages of Anthology 2024, you see.

Poetry, a dance of words in moonlit verse,
Where emotions bloom, and feelings disperse.
Prose, a tapestry woven with threads of thought,
In every line, a story, an essence sought.

Scripts unfold on the stage of the mind,
Characters breathe, their destinies entwined.
Greenwich's students, with pens ablaze,
Craft tales of brilliance in myriad ways.

The Greenwich Anthology 2024, a symphony,
Echoes the spirit of this university.
Each poem, a sonnet to Greenwich's grace,
Each prose, a journey in time and space.

Scripts unfurl, a drama in every line,
A play of passions, where emotions intertwine.
Through these pages, the students impart,
The essence of Greenwich, a work of art.

So, reader, step into this literary sea,
Where Greenwich's tales find their decree.
Anthology 2024, a collective voice,
A poetic journey, a vibrant choice.

At this point, George Thompson, the student who was inputting these prompts into ChatGPT for the benefit of our Contemporary Publishing class, said: 'Eww. No thanks.'

It turned out that using AI to write an introduction might have made us laugh – but it wasn't entirely practical. The prose the computer generated didn't really explain much about the anthology you are reading now.

So, it's left to me, a human (I promise), to have a go instead:

This is an anthology of creative writing from students and staff at the University of Greenwich. It was compiled and edited by third

year undergraduates who are studying a module in Contemporary Publishing.

The Contemporary Publishing course aims to provide a thorough overview of the UK publishing industry and the skills necessary to work in publishing. The students and I look at how books are made and sold and follow the journey manuscripts take from acquisition to their eventual arrival in the shops.

The students also put together a book for themselves – this book. The course is structured so that the theoretical knowledge they gain is mirrored by the practical work they do on compiling this anthology. So, when we talk about acquisitions, they're working on getting submissions. When we're looking at editorial case studies, they're doing their own editorial work. And so on.

Along the way we discuss practical and ethical issues relating to working on editorial and the cultural position of the publishing industry in society. We also look at the history of the written word from clay tablets in Babylon up to contemporary innovations like ebooks, social media and, more recently, Artificial Intelligence...

... Which is how we ended up reading computer generated verse together.

Once the laughter had died down, the thing that stuck out for me was how little relation those two AI introductions actually bore to the pieces that had been submitted to the anthology. I'm wary of claiming that I can necessarily do better – or that you might enjoy reading my words more than the ones ChatGPT generated. But I do at least know that I have more of an understanding of where those pieces come from and why they matter. That's because the prose, poetry and scripts you will find in this anthology are, in their essence, a record of humanity.

The Greenwich Anthology has become a University-wide institution, where students share their creativity and collaborate with peers studying a wide range of subjects and representing a huge range of interests. Every year, the short stories, poems and scripts produced by students express the current concerns of our community in fascinating ways. True to form, this collection provides a fascinating glimpse into the experiences and concerns of a group of people at an educational institution in the year 2024.

Perhaps some of the ideas you will find in these pages are of the kind that you might expect from young people who are newly embarking on adult life. There are stories and poems about relationships, about the educational process, about finding a place in the world. There are also plenty of pieces relating to current affairs (including, of course, AI). But there are also all kind of surprises and imaginative leaps. There's magic. There are aliens. There are ghosts. There's a dead grandmother who seems to be growing in someone's back garden... There's comedy, there's tragedy, there's comedy. There is, in short, life. Come to think of it, I actually agree with the AI here. This book is indeed 'a testament to the power of words and the limitless imagination of our students'.

In fact, it's more. Because this 2024 anthology also boasts a new source of content. This year we have included work from the talented and dedicated teachers of Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. I very much hope you will enjoy reading that too.

Finally, this anthology would not exist without the financial support of the Centre for Research in Language and Heritage (CREL) and the School of Humanities & Social Sciences here at the University of Greenwich. I am grateful that they have made it possible.

SAM JORDISON, 2024



II. POEMS



MARYAM AHMED

Somebody Else

I'm somebody else...

White, white, white
The colour of purity
The colour of beauty
I'm white, white, white.

Opening my eyes more
I can make them big
I can straighten my hair
'Eat with your knife and fork, don't be rude.'

My mother's fair complexion
Passed down to me
I'm white passing?
No. I'm white, white, white.

Aren't you mixed race?
Depends on who's asking.
Which me do you want?
brown, brown, brown.

'You can't speak your own language?'
Laughter and mockery of my accent
My mother tongue isn't what they want
I'm brown, brown, brown.



Narrowing my eyes
I can make them almond shaped
I can tighten my hair into curls
'Eat with your fingers, don't be rude.'

My father's dark tan
Not passed down to me
I'm brown passing?
No, I'm brown, brown, brown.

Brown, brown, brown
The colour of earth
The colour of safety
I'm brown, brown, brown.



YAZMIN BAILEY

The Dormant Daughter

A scream was all that was needed to summon the child.
Its piercing cry clearly heard from the depth of darkness.
The sharp shrill that deafened the woman and invoked the

Dormant Daughter

Who lives beneath the weight of her heavy heart,
Surrounded by steely thorns that prick and prod,
Forever choking on words unspoken.

Only the siren scream could awaken the sleeping child.

Only then could she appear

Sodden with sadness and drenched in despair.

Only then could she gasp for air amidst the torrent of tears.

Only then did the woman become the child,
Momentarily robed in her pain,

Haunted by howls that echoed her own.

Until she could bear the child no more

And pushed her back into her dungeon of darkness,

Held captive by her own hands,

Willing the Dormant Daughter to die.

DIANA BORDEI

Unburden

I carry the burden
Of those who unrightly
Have wronged me
Through my passing days
But now that I know
I choose to travel lightly
Their luggage
I can finally vacate
I've carried and carried
For most of my life
The past
And now feels so heavy
With every addition
Of a miserable fact
I made my load harder to carry
I cried many times
I screamed and I fought
And all those emotions I felt
Were all but in vain
For future won't hold
On grudge and remorse
On guilt and on shame
I've walked through the darkness
Of memory lane
I wished I could've done better
I have felt the pain
Of regret

Again and again
But then understood
It's the journey that matters.

...

I travel more lightly
Since I don't collect burdens
I only have lessons to share
Between past and the future
The present prevails
This second, this moment, today.

SUSANNA GASPARINI BOUDJEMAA

From The Opposite Side

You dress like a nun,
But I'm looking for a slut.
You have cooked a Sunday roast,
But I asked for beans on toast.

You are gentle and kind,
But I want you rough and ready.
You are the mother of my kids
But I want to be your child.

It is what I want that
You say you want to do.
It is what I say that
You want to say you do.

Forgive me for my words,
But I was never good at school.
I have tried to write a text,
But it's all become a mess.

Letters are dancing in my head,
But my pen cuts to the chase.
You're a pillar that holds my weight,
But your heart is made of glass.

Loneliness

You are a fairyfly,
Invisible to the eye,
Paddling your wings...

Underwater.

You are an ant,
buried in the sand,
Gasping for your last...

Breath.

You are in an empty café,
At seven o'clock in the morning,
Savouring burned coffee...

Beans.

You are the bark,
Of a tree on fire,
In the darkness of the...

Forest.

You are the echo,
Of a coin dropped,
From the highest of the...

Mountains.

You are the cold blade,
Of a sharp knife,
Caressing the skin close to my...

Heart.

SILVIE SINEAD COX

to do list

tomorrow, on your anniversary,
i will tend to you

(what is left of you)

i will pull up the weeds,
and straighten up the stick that holds your last toy.
perhaps i could lay out some flowers, and hope that
they are not seized by the weather, of this cold autumn,
and hope that i would not remember
how your paw was lifeless in my hand,
how you sighed so deeply when you left.

tomorrow, on your anniversary,
i will sit by you

(what is left of you)

i will speak to you,
and ignore the sun or the rain.
perhaps i could read you a book, and hope that
my brain does not picture you beneath the soil, so small,
and hope that i will not think
of you wrapped like a bundle of nothing,
of what is left of you.

HAFSAH HAREEM FAROOQI

Finding Yourself

Tell me, what is cool?
Do we follow what people say in school?
Because sometimes people do not have a clue,
This is completely true.

If we follow the herd we are doing right,
as we do not want a fight.
But if we do not, we stick out like a sore thumb,
causing us to feel sadness and feel numb.

But why is this the case?
When we should face
That we are cool
This is what we should learn from school.

There's nothing wrong with you
which is completely true.
There is no need to fit
in as if you are your own person, you are a hit.

Do not lose yourself
Always try finding yourself.
When you are yourself, you shine like a star
From close and afar.

You may be a solo act
But you are being yourself as a matter of fact.



Do not let others take away your shine
As this shine will always keep you fine.

This is yours to keep
all the time, even in your sleep.
Sure, the path could be tricky
and things could get sticky.

But, it is worth it
and you will be a hit.
It is something we all know
That will always be the case then and now.



Never sacrifice yourself
Always be yourself.
As you will be the best
and beat all the rest.



Always be yourself
And never give up finding yourself.
You will be your happiest when you are yourself
As you will always continue to find yourself.

SHANIYA FOFANAH-FORDE

Mental Health at University

It is not that I don't want to be here, I do
The devil tightens on my vocal chords
And he won't let loose
Most of the time I have to fight to get out of bed
I can't keep letting my demons control what's inside of my head

From a young age my teachers have always told me I am bright
I worked so hard to get where I am
To hear the 'no's'
And 'it's okay if you do not go to university considering
You're always so tired'
But it's not that I don't want to be here,
I don't want to be anywhere else even if I tried

The academic validation is what kept me going so far
So dragging my limbs and the flesh of my brain
So one day I can quit the pain
I study so the little girl in me with high hopes
Can crack a smile through the muddy colour of my eyes
She is the reason I can count many stars in the skies

I am inspired by delicacy in Lemn Sissay's work,
The honesty of Rupi Kaur's pain,
And the sadness in Edgar Allen Poe's abstain,
But most importantly
In the resilience and fortitude in my mind
The rebellion in my strife.



One day someone will enrol
And take on the world as a whole
And we will roar,
Cheering on others,
Hoping to explore
Mental health as resilience,
Not a stop sign
That denies brilliance.



It's a bit
fuzzy. The way I
walk throughout the day
when I can't focus on anything

(but ache, ache, ache).

It crumbles
like cliff rocks

t
u
m
b
l
i
n
g
h
u
r
t
l
i
n
g
l
e
a
P
i
n
g

into the sea.

Dreams

In my most careless dreams
I tell the moon about you;
not only the face that you wear,
but your hopes, laughter, mind, too.

In my least dangerous dreams
we stand together on a cliffside;
our eyes are dried by the wind
and with rings our fingers are tied.

In my usual, strange dreams
I speak with every possible tense;
you smile, I say I love you,
and hope you do not take offence.

In my rare, terrifying dreams
I am only able to hear my heart;
no matter my desperate feelings,
you say no, forcing us apart.

In my most dangerous dreams
we stand together on a cliffside;
the rage in your eyes is everclear
as you push me down into the tide.

In my least careless dreams
I stare at the moon in silence;
in a moment of desperation
I imagine the taste of defiance.

GEORGIA KATELANOU

Opposite Days

Rainy days are my happy days.
When the thunder makes my thoughts silent.
Where the water droplets touch my face,
And it masks my tears.
For all my brothers and my sisters,
Out in the rain,
Whose umbrellas are broken,
I will break mine as well.
To show you my happy days.
How I can persevere with hope,
Of sunny days.
When I can be sad,
For my sisters and brothers
Who won't need me anymore.
Perhaps, rainy days will come again;
And my smile will shine through,
For anyone that might need me again,
But I pray, oh I pray.
For my brothers and my sisters,
To not come back to me,
Thinking that rainy days,
Are the saddest days.
Because I am only but one weak human,
That also needs my brothers and sisters,
In sunny days.
In the higher powers I pray,
For rainy days to never end.

So, the sun doesn't outshine me,
Because one day I might burn away,
But for my brothers and my sisters
I pray.

SOPHIE LLOYD

The day is a newborn baby, minutes...

The day is a newborn baby, minutes
Old, conceived in a still and cold twilight.
Birds trill wishes to the breeze, yet
No song will save this baby's life. Despite

A mere twelve hours of being, despite luck's
Refusal to attend or baptise;
The day begins to crawl amid coos of light
That waltz against the old oak trunks,

As though she's known this life before.
Hope braids with the smell of pungent leaf
litter and yarrow while summer grieves
Its own death. Shrooms and lichens adorn

the mahogany shadows where the fox
Retires his possession of night, his
stomach derelict yet mostly sufficed.
He halts – meeting eyes with the dunnock.

Not friends or foe nor prey or beast,
Spines built with finitude yet both at peace.
A rustle distracts the allies, a deer
Breaking fast with sedges and grace.

'Fine place to die and live – don't you think, bug?'
I look to my Dad the way tin looks



To gold. I nod and his shoulder takes
The weighty burden of my steel thoughts.

Sat with him, my eyes return to the deer.
I ponder the day, its comrades and me,
All limited by time, constricted entities –
Please hope, don't forget us here.

MEGHAN CASEY LOUGHRAN

At least I loved you 'til death

We met at a dance
You took me by hand
You asked me with earnest
Come with me to England?

I looked up at you
With complete disbelief
With no ring on my hand
Our meeting had been brief

Your eyes of emerald
I could never forget
I would be your wife
And on that, I was set

On one autumn day
I took up your deal
To England we went
I knew not what to feel

The only thing that I knew for sure
Was the way my wee heart fluttered
On the day that we went to St Pat's chapel
And 'I do' we both lovingly uttered

Back home, the tensions were growing high
The jobs for the Fenian were scarce

But we settled down and we had ten wains
The noise in the house, it was fierce

'I love you, Mary' you told me, my love
'I love you more' was always my answer
So my wee heart shattered the day the doc rang
'Mrs Loughran, your husband has cancer'

We tried it all, all the doctor could offer
Chemotherapy, radio – no use
You'd turn off your bastard hearing aid
As I said 'Tony, drink your juice!'

And then one day, with ten by our bed
You drew your last, deepest breath
I knew then that I'd lost my best friend
But at least I'd loved you 'til death.

So a few years go by, and Mick's at the door
'You said you'd go back, given the chance'
'Mam, we're going home.' I thought I'd be glad
But my memory is cast back to our first dance.

I'll come for a visit here and there
Now that men have set down their rifle
And I'll sit in the Glenavon house hotel
And murder a sherry trifle

The house Mick has is in Killeenan
It's just the most beautiful abode



It's got a big kitchen and an upstairs bog
I've even got my own commode

I do often wonder what life would be like
Had I not sailed across the sea
But at the end of the day what's for me there?
You built a beautiful life for me

On one November morn, in Dipton Manor
I drew my last, deepest breath
I knew then that I'd be with my best friend
The one who had loved me 'til death.



TOBY MILLIS

ChatGPT

I asked ChatGPT to write me a poem,
And instead it wrote me an essay,
And instead it called in sick for work,
And instead it went on annual leave,
And instead it asked for a P45,
And instead it declared retirement,
And instead it died.

I asked ChatGPT to write me a poem,
And instead it died.

Attention Span

I am writing a poem and my attention span is
Yesterday I went to the shops and bought a
Did you know that there are over two million
That reminds me of the time when I went to
The shops to buy a
Time when I went to
The other day
Which is tomorrow
Might be when I will
Next week I will be able to
By next month I will be able to finish
By next year I will be able to finish my
That reminds me of the time when I was able
To finish my sentence.

NOVLET PHILEZIA MCLEARY

Pretty Please

Lonely little bird sitting in a cage in Catford Broadway
To you I hardly even know what to say.
I would like to introduce myself to you if I may.
By the way, I came here only yesterday.

Look at me please and listen to what I have to say.
Or tell me if I am standing in your way.
Tell me where you are from if you think you know
Instead of looking in that mirror below.

You listen to music everyday.
Is it because your master has nothing to say?
If only a friend could visit you for a day
And a few eggs you could lay without delay.

Your feathers are so beautiful and green.
You are as pretty as a queen.
I would like to call you pretty, please!
If that would make you feel at ease.

Number: 5

My bed was grieved
With my sighs, by day and night.
Grey smells of depression
And bitter taste of pain,
That runs through the very veins of my being.

The crude voice that spoke
And said who cares!
Even though his secrets
are left untold.

From my window the view
of two high-rise buildings
was my only consolation.
The ones I never thought
would be my new home.

That love that should have been known
But which was never shown,
Is still left haunting number: 5.

Hope

The smell of hope is a sweet honey-comb
In a distant land.
The look of an apple hanging
On a tree beyond one's reach.
The sound, is a beating drum
Vibrating in the wind.
The taste of a nice steamy dish,
Of rice and steamed fish
After a hard day's work
The feel of a fleecy blanket,
On a cold and lonely winter night.

Stop!!!

Bald-headed white man
Painted black.
Stop the pretence.
Reveal yourself.
Stop hiding behind the man
That you are not.

Half-white, half-black
Don't confuse yuh self
Make up yuh mind
Stop hiding in the dark.

Black is in the blood.
It is not skin deep.
Give up the fight,
It is not yours to keep.

Just be yourself
Not who you are not.
Bald-head white man
You have had enough
Stop the fight!

JOSEPH O'SULLIVAN

The Haunt of the Molochwalker

See the child.

See him unwashed and pale and covered in the lotion that was
inside of her.

See him vend a weeping of his bivouac tenure.

See him scalp a ticketless audience of cardboard towns.

He begs from the street corner... shifting change in his palm like a
die to cast.

See him still.

The cap before him is empty, but his heart is full when he picks
from pockets stark of frenzy.

He drinks his whiskey by the capful – pays his dollars by the fistful.

He hits the bottle to drink the yellow from his spine
– for he longs to slake the thirst of his pale heart.

He tries to sow his wounds... but they sprout violence he cannot bay.

See the man.

He sits with himself to chew glass – to mull over the details again.

He counts his noctourniquets by the bloody tally on his wrist

And when he connects the dots of his constant elation –

He'll find it starred the seven sides of a six pentacle die.

See him still.

He sees the slouch – the creep of walls dropping on the eave.

They plug his mouth like a nursing thumb.

Sometimes he sees a vague figure beyond polished glass.

Multiple spouse wounds and time flirt with a face

Tarnished by the bludgeoning senescence of being.
What he sees is all he's ever known as him.

See the child.

See him unwashed and pale and covered in the lotion that was
inside of him.

He lays tangled with her – drunk, furnishing the past with gay livery.

He nurses like an ox greedily lapping between her legs.

Content to be done with at will – but cursed are those who speak
its name.

It's of hand-me-down anxieties shared over the bedpan.

It's of a phrase that rings the anxious cloister bell in the back of his mind.

It's of a bruise – of a face of the die.

See the child.

See him as she sees him.

Sat drunken with receipts – blossom ragged in the palm of his sleeve.

Heaving out a cough from his wrung throat like goading a wolf.

She throws up the torches to spy the infiltrator

But finds the plot is dressed only in strawmen

Palely stood by a crescent covered clutch

Cradling a six sided die.

JOSH H PHELPS

Alley Vodka

When you reach the flayed and broken remains
and place down the last husk, an offering
for/from something vicious, a troubled teen
who hates his mum, (or) someone like you,
you see a faded familiar fleck of skin
lying purposefully atop the plague pit
of shattered bodies.

Could it be the first one? You ask,

(n) knowing the first one was never here,

(o) knowing there was (no knowing) the first one,

(t) knowing the last one was not the last one,
neatly annihilated like the (idea of) last one.

Your Banquo, crashing your brittle banquet
spread out for your/all eyes only.

Stabbed into the soles of her feet

splinters of your/Banquo's broken bones

become larvae and bite down,

across the sofa she smiles and stuffs

tears into her cheek wrinkles. She can't hide

her pained walked and whimpering eyes, can't/won't hide
her scorn.

Has she told you before? *yes!*

Among other stories/snaps; promises,
bone daggers, dynasties of last ones.

Why her kick feels so sharp you (don't) know,
not that she (ever kicked) (cares to kick anymore).

She tells a fine tale of silence as
you stick in another splinter.

If/When she one day awoke to find you lying
still atop the plague pit, she would/will pick out the maggots
and re-learn how to walk in heels.

DESANTILA QERIMAJ RRANXA

Reanimation Zone

See?

Here the nurse comes
in white, with needles
to tend to your body.
Is that needle our last hope?

It is time to write poems
about needles and tubes.
About the breath surviving in them,
the only lullaby left
rhyming endlessly.
Swinging
in the depth of decay,
we all fight to meet late, later, latest.

If only your face wouldn't be so diminished
and the neon so bright, so unavoidable,
a strong, absent colour.

If only the margins of life
wouldn't be so defining
of open eyes.

Look!

Maybe you can look,
or the intuition of your blood can tell
if your life is flowing more freely now,

needle after needle,
pressed in the cubital vein,
an area of transition in the body.
Transition to where father?

I'm waiting for the doctors to cheat what we fear.
The effacement of life.

Perhaps we live only to leave,
and recognise that what's lost
has no countenance
just the plunge of pain.

I can almost be your darkness,
its demand to be understood.
It tears me and throws me with pleas
where you now dwell.

Could this be the cold shoulder?

Come back to me!

We can go to the sea,
and challenge this bleakness
with my childhood,
free in the mercy of water,
earning a voice.

Speak again!
One more word!

Otherwise the loss
brooding in no land,
will sink into my senses
and become my second
inner form.

Think Kindly Of People With Too Many Masks

It is difficult!
The connection between
loss and love covers me in ash.

Love demands loudly,
'Look at me, look at me,
don't let all of me go.'

I'd like to cut her tongue
and think of another pain
or bones without a birthday.

I am dependent on obvious love.

My lover's hardened coffin cracks
spreading unbelievable rumours
and I am the force of a flood...
its harsh and fast
parade of broken things,
barbaric water, stays invisible
at the same time.

'Look at me!
You know the masks
he carves in everyone's head
lovingly, happily, his fantasy
is overwhelming even to himself.
Think kindly of people with too many masks.'

But all I see are lies,
long worms instead of a pure touch,
my cry is the truth that binds
my choice of echoing tempests.

'Look at me! Hurt is
a martyr swallowing separation.
Once the hunger is filled,
the sky will pour moons and suns.
Think kindly of people with too many masks.'

I won't look at her!
I know she is filled with my voices!

MARIA SAFANPO

Sometimes – Perhaps

Sometimes time runs quickly
But it can run slowly
Perhaps people's perception of time is different

Sometimes time can heal a wound
But there are things that can't be healed
Perhaps its owner won't let it heal
 So it won't be forgotten

Sometimes thoughts can't be spoken
But the silence can
Perhaps it speaks its mind

Sometimes feelings can't be told
But they can be seen
Perhaps they are trying to conceal them
 But expressions say otherwise

Sometimes people cry on the happiest day
But some laugh at the most depressing day
Perhaps they don't know how to convey their feelings

Sometimes people let others go
But some can't leave them
Perhaps we should let go of the attachment
 That lives in our heart and move on

U

The universe
seems to
hate the way
we are together

Every time
I need you
the most, the
universe doesn't work.

My head
becomes
the desert of
emptiness

You are the
star I need
to lead
my way out

Of here.
You are
within my eyes
but I

can't reach
you.
I run through
the universe

but I
still can't find
my way
to hold you.

The Day Red Snowdrops Bloom

The blue moon fails to speak.
The sky dares not smile.
Heaven witnesses this sight,
but pretends not to know.

The white snow is turning red.
The air smells like a warm iron.
The light in your eyes turns dark,
and your hands lose strength.

This cursed land catches my tears,
my trembling voice chants your name.
The beauty of spring fades,
and *snowdrops* bloom in red.

Ox and I stay here together
in hope you will be back with the tiger.
The rabbit has come with the sun,
but you can never return.

JUSTIN SOLLY

Wishful words

The dandelion words 'I love you',
scattered to the wind like wishes,
promises gilded in copper pennies –
dreams dropped into the wishing-well.

The mercurial words are meaningless,
words are as wont to change as the weather,
fool's gold for fools, as valuable as pennies –
panned from the bottom of the wishing-well.

B_L_A_N_K

I won't say your name.
It's the only power I have.
Our love was written in pencil.
You erased it.
Now, I'm a blank page.
I'm nothing.
My memory is _____.
I erase you.
Block.
Delete.
Erase.
I won't speak to you.
Look at you.
Hear from you.
I won't say your name.
If I say it –
Then it's real.
If I say it –
Then I remember.
Erasure is the only power I have.



Beaches of Bone

The sea drags in and out like breath, leaving behind a bare beach of
emptiness,
a spine of broken seashells like bones, for those with homes filled
with emptiness.

The wasted talent of a life squandered, rotting in a graveyard of
dead dreams,
the passing of dreams to dust marked by tombstones, surrounded
by a quiet emptiness.



A constellation in the sky, way ports to guide weary travellers lost in
blackness,
a blanket of stars blotted out by twinkling city lights, forgotten in
emptiness.



Rubber dinghies inflated with hope float across oceans of
indifference,
a mother's heart, once full of love, weeps as her weary arms cradle
emptiness.

Some will land upon the boneyard beach, bleached with death,
the survivors that are left are burdened with eclipsing emptiness.

JON SUTCLIFFE

Laura-Lye Laura-Leigh

She in a fit of wisdom – Imprinted on me
The illusion of tomorrow
The day and the next
And the precious nature of the time
In between
And I suddenly realized the thief I had been
And the now damaged quality – All the
Time I stole
Quantified itself in an aching instance
With its disappearance

In a gap of new-found poverty
In a timeless deficit
The past and the rest
Made meaningless with memory now transparent
Like Air
Climbing from the gap that is made for those
With nothing but time to spend – All the
Time I stole
Infinitely itself an aching distance

Now Nigh
Laura-Lye
I too long astray
Laura-Leigh

The Damsel and the Dark

Throw me a rope, I'll make my ascent

Fag in mouth

Unkempt, A ragged Romeo in scraps?

Scuff my trainers along the brickwork

Graze a knee on a loose ledging

Attain a scar from a rogue nail

We'll laugh about it later

For now

Throw me a rope

At the top, I'll stake a claim

And new route

Fresh breath, Casanova back from the dregs

Untie my tongue with a melody

Sing so soft, a lover's whisper,

Resound, a pennywhistle verse

We'll sing it again later

For now

Throw me a rope

Near the dawn, I'll guide your descent

Fag in mouth

Piquet, Jongleur – Jumping Jack in a bag

Bargain with a gambler's pride, one bet

Love being for an after party

Echo, As wounds refresh and regale

Repaid too much too late

And now

Into the dawn

On the ground, disguised in vain
 Destitute
Redeemed, Chaos – Her charms, wits, badge and tags
Depart, but she beckons a return
Her lingering scent, sultry tone
Plays a symphony, swift and terse
 Reverbs long into later
 Now and
 Into the dawn

With the breeze, and sparrow accent
 Fag in mouth
Now deaf, Nyx – Her raven hair pressed with pegs
Returns, to kiss the day a goodnight
As I, in wanderlust's stupor
Follow a gaze for direction
 Steps to be retraced much later
 Now free
 Swept, like a breeze

In a song, A new refrain
 A flash flute
Ricochet, Erebus – Gifted his dog tags
To burn, in chosen ceremonies
With love, poses, advocacy
Into this crime I fell alone
 Truth's veil slipped much later
 Free, Now
 Swept, with a breeze

Three Masks

Against five decorative
Ice cubes
Made of silver
In an ornamental
Unused ashtray
Upon its inspection
Only

A gentle wind
Belligerent
In reminders
Knocks occasionally
Against my door
But again
Upon its inspection
Only

A meditation I felt a presence
A force – An old soldiering
Soul return
Wherein I laid
To rest

But again
Upon its inspection
Only

Nothing at all

ELOISE J TUSON

Goodbye

How can I say goodbye?
can I look her in the eyes for the final time?
her smile and walk away into the distance,
back trying not to cry.
frozen: unable to watch but unable to look away.
realised how much one person can mean to you.
they can be –
in your life for a short amount of time. What an impact they can
have,
leave.
become a better person
they never broke.
coming
admit it.
move on?
her.
corner?
victories?
advice?
going when I can't?
people come into your life for a reason
must they leave?
needed her; I wouldn't have survived perhaps without her. I don't need her
anymore.
will:
I fall,
me,

How
Watching
as I smile
I stand
I never
How special
even after only being
what a void they
How they help you
and fix something
I knew this day was
but I didn't want to
How am I supposed to
I can't do this without
Who will fight my
Celebrate those small
Provide
Keep me
They say
but why
At the time I
But I think I always
someone to catch me when
someone who understood
someone who never

judged,
to,
steam to.
the impact she had.
light in the dark,
when others weren't,
me when I didn't.
perspective to her.
life.
was pretty bad'

someone to talk
someone to let off
I cannot describe
How she was my
how she was there
how she believed in
I owe my change in
I owe her my
'Life 'pre-Britta'
but she made it better.

24/3/23

PANIC. The
familiar feeling creeping in, compressing your chest, feeling
weighed down by an invisible pressure, breaths becoming laboured,
palms
tingling, the shaking and restlessness making it impossible to focus,
swirling, spinning. Trying
frantically to suppress it, push it down, bottle it up before it closes
all rational thinking. Close
your eyes, feel the floor beneath your feet, slow, deep
breaths, focus on what's around, listen to the class
discussion as their voices blur, the buzzing noise builds
up and the world distorts, the anxiety bubbling up the
more you realise you can't focus, the nausea and dizziness kicking
in.

The Switch. When
reality begins to collapse, the mental scramble to suppress it being
impossible to fight. Control
slipping away. A wave of dread washes over. Fully submerged.
Where am I?

What is going on?

'Ok, it sounds like you're having a panic attack.'

How did I not recognise that?

'Try to take deep breaths.'

This can't be happening, I want it to stop.

'you're ok, you're safe.'

The palpitations continue.

'Slow deep breaths, follow my breathing: in through the nose, out through the mouth.'

How do I breathe? I don't think I can, I can't remember how.

'That's it, you're doing really well'

Tingling palms and cheeks, am I dying?

'Do you want to sit down?'

I can't feel my legs, paralysed by fear, tunnel vision, nausea, I'm
trapped. His voice, the one
of safety and rationality fading, becoming distant.

'Describe to me all the blue things you can see.'

How am I supposed to speak? The
tightness persists, gripping my throat. Chairs, his
lanyard, my tie, the windows. I can't do
this.

'You're doing really well.'

Carpet, notice boards.

'Good... your breathing seems slower.'

Dizziness stays, tingling and numbness
continues, Am I
having a heart attack?

*'It's just the adrenaline, it feels the same but physiologically you're fine, I know it's
scary but you're safe.'*

Safe is the last thing I feel. Is it ever going to end? Am I dying? I'm
sorry about this.

'You don't need to apologise, you can't control it.'

I wish I could.

The intensity slowly lifting, confusing
slowing, feeling less
frantic, slowly
regaining feeling, replaced with
crushing exhaustion. Emotionally
drained. Longest 20 minutes
of my life.

CHARLOTTE WOOD

Sunken Quarrel

That argument buried me so deep,

Six feet under the rubble.

The soil weighed me down yet
was so weak compared to my longing for you.

My desire to be with you,
near to you like two lovers' graves
in the same patch of Earth.

The dirt failed to pull me deeper.

I clutched at the roots of our dying plant,
hurled myself out of its whispering throes.

Our bond stings like my tongue
on an ice cube fresh out of the freezer.

The initial burn of a crackling fire,
embers yet to ignite.

I'd swim a rough river of thorns
feel the piercing of your actions again
even once.

The blood may flow but so does
the wound that rips my skin raw.

Affections thread the skin in stitches,
makeshift gauze of your utmost remedies.

Smile, the kiss of my lips still stuck between your teeth.

Taste it, taste me, taste us.
Memorise it, do it again.
I drop my loving into this equation,
food dye into a mixture
watch as I stir in my forgiveness.

Surely we must take some shape.
Some abstract formation of what once was.

Hypocrisy

Pixelated, polluted.
Pricked, prodded.
Poisoned, petted.
Poor and pallid.

Contorted in HD, magnified pixels pop.
Dance on screens, bleed beneath.

Timid, tired.
Tied up, tortured.
Tainted, tarnished.
Teased and tense.

Propped up, a window display.
Suffer and silenced, depiction led astray.

Ravaged, reclusive.
Rejected, renounced.
Reproached, repulsed.
Resigned and reticent.

Pretty pictures, living things, struck.
Mankind; hypocrites.

ADELA XHEZA

The Devil

Not nostalgia no
But similar in the sense that

I knew you once
 Loved

Long ago
 It was last week
Or year
 Maybe century

Your face shifted
 Never changed
But I will always know
 Those eyes

Do you remember?
 Regret?
Don't believe you're capable
Unless what you miss is the warmth
 Hold
Of your claws deep through my throat

And the sounds of my breath
 As I choked
My memory is as clear as a tear
 Serves me too well

Weaver's Lament

Sat here alone
Thread hung by my thumbs
Word by word I weave the night

Steady handed Penelope
Teach me your patience Ithaca's queen
Word by word I weave the night

Is this not my legacy
One of unravelling and revealing knots
Word by word I weave the night

No, but I'm no Alexander
I revere the oracle, not forcing her to reveal
Word by word I weave the night

I go without sword or shears
I cut my thread and fingers with my teeth
Word by word I weave the night

Oh Arachne I know you too
The girl so much more talented than I
Word by word I weave the night

Spider queen, I clapped with your fall
You have your hubris wrapped around your throat
Word by word I weave the night

Those in the forest call for me
'Weaver's daughter leave your loom leave your room'
Word by word I weave the night

I call back to them from my cloisters
'I'm no one's daughter no longer. I have no name'
Word by word I weave the night

My hair spins into the loom from tip to root
I become my shroud with each tercet I create
Word by word I weave the night

Great or nothing great or nothing great or?
Ah but the heroes all go tragically like the rest
Word by word I weave the night

No one is remembered for simply living happily
It's why we adore Orpheus despite having been Eurydice
Word by word I weave the night

We'll be forgotten in time, we who know the fates
But the threads will stay vibrant and strong when unearthed in
fragments
Word by word we weave our night

Those in Glass Houses

It's purgatory [but] It's liveable
It's condemned [but] It's manageable
It's an empty home [but] It's a full house
It's made of glass [but] It's breakable
It's a hell [but] It's liveable

Eventually

Down

The

Road

But

For

Now

I can wait for my exile
Dante had his Virgil
While all I own are pebbles

Golden

In this light
By candle flame
I can pretend
What's brass is more
Than an alloy
There's no philosopher's stone
To turn pyrite into gold
More a trick
And trusting
In the wrong light
Like my hair or eyes
Golden in the sun
It's a mistake of sight



III. PROSE



ANSEL ABBOTT

Darkton

PLACE TRAVEL REVIEW — DARKTON (DANGER: NO MORE THAN HOME)

PREVIOUS ARTICLE: *Chiaroscuro's Nightlife — Our Top 5 Clubs from the City with a Thousand.*

NEXT ARTICLE: *Navigating Half-Formed Places for Beginners.*

One advert from Eagle Incorporated has been blocked. Eagle Incorporated has been made aware of this and disapproves.

POSTED BY *Ecnefrecilanaekamtonlli* ON 26/10/2015

Oh, I do like to be beside the seaside. Oh, I do like to be beside the sea. For any other travel blog to go three years without a mention of a beach must surely be wondrous, but given the subject matter I deal with, surely none of my faithful readers will be that surprised.

Yes, beaches are one of the most beautiful works of nature back home, and the sea breeze makes them the perfect attraction for a hot summer's day. As that hot season takes its leave, perhaps some of you are already yearning for a sandy shore again.

But what's this? You don't have the money to jump on a jet and travel to Bermuda? Well, have no fear, for in this post I'll be covering a holiday staple, with the usual twist you can expect from the sort of Places I cover. So, search through your lion-filled wardrobe for clothes, pack those ruby slippers, and take a ride through

a phantom tollbooth to one of the most recent Places I've visited for a possible fix for your holiday cravings.

(To tell the truth it isn't actually *that* recent. I've been sitting on this one for a month now, waiting for the time to strike)

Darkton is an up-and-coming Place that not only is actively hoping for visitors (hence styling themselves after Brighton), but also doesn't seem to be hoping for them for some malicious purpose! I know! Seriously, the only death I saw there was when I hunted down a spider to squish. Having checked, I can confirm that there weren't any freaky immortality dealios on top of their main gimmick.

Speaking of gimmicks, allow me to briefly segue into a more scholarly tone: two of the four classical elements, water and fire, are reversed in Darkton. It's a bit confusing: I'm no scientist, so can't give you the exact specifics of the swap. But if you were to strike a match, a gravity-defying globule of water would materialize around its tip, and the wood would still blacken. If you were to wait for rain, sparks would fly down from smoking clouds, though you'll be happy to know spit is unaffected. There is no night or day, but rather high-tide and low-tide, as the ocean's burning illumination flows to and fro. Showers are flamethrowers there, muggers (I wouldn't be an efficient travel journalist if I didn't seek out local dangers, would I?) brandish kiddy water pistols that burn like acid, and when I ordered tea at a charming beachside café, they gave me something that's difficult to put into words.

That's why I took a picture: *

Additionally, two of the Chinese elements, metal and wood, are also switched. This is much more common, so many of you will be used to it, but it's still worth a mention. If anyone knows of a Place with less conventional switches, please alert me. Who doesn't want to be able to breathe earth without choking?

With that out of the way, allow me to introduce my stay.

There are currently no specific rituals to reach Darkton directly, so longer routes are necessary to get there. I opted for a usual Borderlands-to-Crossroads drive, before travelling eastwards from the range to access Lemon Mountain. From here, or other Places with dangerous liquids, simply place a postcard in said liquid and bring to boil.

As I watched the juice around me burst aflame, sour smoke stinging my eyes, I could truly understand why pyromania is such a thing. My tyres (correction: my car's tyres) ground in the sand, and then I crested a hill to reveal Darkton in all its glory.

Do you like fishing villages, the sort who would bristle at being called quaint? Do you like rows and rows of beach-huts, standing in rainbow ranks? Do you like a clear attention to detail, e.g., Places using urban feng-shui to best integrate nature and nurture? Then Darkton's the Place for you...

In all honesty, it took my breath away, and not due to smoke. Those with breathing difficulties should be happy to know that smoke is only a problem in the transition zone, so you'll be able to enjoy your stay as much as anyone else.

(Though as an aside, I should mention this *isn't* one of the Places where you can just simply ignore more mortal concerns. Though it's harmless, I recommend standing up before flushing the toilet. Water equals fire, remember, and unlike baths or sewers you could literally be caught with your pants down.)

As I approached the town, the thing that struck me the most was the shadows. Of course, scholars among you may say that this symbolises how Places are shadows of home, distorted flickering copies. Or, you may think of Chiaroscuro or Facsimile Falls, where shadow has been developed as an art-form beyond puppets or using

hands to cast butterflies flapping across the wall. Darkton's shadows are comparable, but much more integrated into the town, giving it an ever-present and changing dapple of artistry. Some are large scale (like the urban feng-shui I mentioned a few paragraphs up), but others are as simple as an array of sticks in a garden forming the silhouette of a house-number, or a twirling dancer crowning a studio door.

You shouldn't be put off by my fishing village comparison either. Kiah Oclasih (Thousian, so you know it's fancy) is a well-catered hotel. Not five stars, but it wasn't like my uncultured body could tell that when it was sinking into the plush mattress of my Oceanview suite.

Besides, the place *is* still being established. Come back in a year, and I bet Kiah Oclasih will be positively cosmopolitan, brimming with bougie luxury.

Those looking for a longer stay, or a more affordable family house, will be happy to know that there are beachside houses to rent for reasonable prices. They are however limited in what currencies they accept, so be sure to make yourself aware of this beforehand. We all know how roundabout conversion can get.

After checking in, and dropping off my luggage, I went out exploring. My first stop was the star attraction of any beachside holiday – drumroll please – the beach!

It was a beach.

No, really, how much is there to say? Given the near-omnipresent lightsource, tanning is easy. There are kites flying, puppet shows, sandcastles, even rides from donkeys and donkey-adjacents, all the usual.

The strangest thing I found was a roped-off area around the northern stretch, far away from most of the crowds. I had to get

my sunglasses out to shield myself from the light there. Turns out my description of the elements being wholly switched was inaccurate, so sue me if I misled you at the start; it was to give you the authentic experience, and not a gross disruption of my journalistic necessities. (It won't happen again.)

Anyhoo, the fire had ended up glassing the sand in that zone: civil servants were clearing away the glass in great wellys, to make sure nobody shredded their feet by accident.

The civil servants also assured me that only one person had incinerated themselves by fire here, and that was their own fault due to a blindingly obvious interaction with one of the oddities they had. The number of people incinerated via water is higher, but still under fifty. When I went crime-seeking later that 'night', the few muggers I met were easily defeated, escaped or reasoned with. So again, Darkton is not only one of the safest Places I've been, but they empathetically are *not* paying for this message either.

After this, I visited one of the local cafes to plot out the rest of my stay. There aren't any local delicacies that I can recommend, though it bears repeating that the inversion affects a lot of conventional consumables. Technically, I suppose you could call most meals a local delicacy because of this.

It became apparent to me then that I didn't actually have anyone to enjoy the beach *with*, when that is one of this location's main draws. The flames lapped in the distance as I pondered this. If I were a scientist, would this render my very experiment unsuitable? Probably. But I'm sure you lot can form your own opinions and judgements.

Still, this has led me to realise that there aren't as many attractions to review as one would hope. For all those in the debate about

how 'real' Places are, you will be interested to know there aren't any castles or old manor homes to visit nearby.

There is a pleasure pier, which has all the games one might expect. However, it's still under construction. Many of the plots where arcade machines should be are empty, and the staff said the contraptions were still being imported. They do have a decent variety though, from all sorts of Places, so if there's any arcade fanatics amongst you, it is worth checking out. Sometimes the building work's clamour breaches the circus tunes like an emphatically metaphorical leviathan, but it's only audible from the pier itself, so this shouldn't disrupt the rest of your stay.

As I walked down the boardwalk, stopping off in the odd shop or two, I headed to my final stop of this review. The aquarium, or perhaps pyrorium would be a better term, is another of Darkton's clearly Brighton-inspired elements. Stretched out like the evening shadow of an earthly place, it's a tower which rivals any of the Place's other buildings in height. Its neighbours project various other creatures, their silhouettes playing across the building's walls to entertain and offer previews of what strange beasts lie between those walls.

After a brief queue where I had a chance to discuss Darkton with some of the Place's other tourists (all had appreciative thoughts to voice), and a small charge, I was admitted, and promptly jumped a foot in the air. Don't be fooled into thinking you've accidentally entered a haunted house by mistake – the entrance corridor is simply lined with jets of smoke and steam, for a reason I can't quite understand, but it certainly serves in building atmosphere.

After a 'magma-swamp' section, its enclosures displaying numerous bright salamanders, water- and serpent-flies with wings like a church window, and a remarkable open-aired bird cage, dwells the

underfire section. That is the underwater analogue, by the by, not 'under fire' like the zone contains some eternal battlefield where creatures have evolved among military bombardments. It's perfectly safe for children, so don't you worry about that.

I won't describe the entire bestiary that lies between those walls—that would take all day. But to give you a taster:

Pyrovisagus could best be described as lionfish, except adorably bumbling and with their tentacles (Yeah, lionfish apparently have tentacles. Thanks Google.) so thick and interwoven that it becomes a sort of knitted wool. The pyrorium puts on weekly shows where they shear them and provide wool-weaving sessions twice a day.

Merechidnas are mermaid echidnas. Parents be advised, there are plushies of them in the gift-shop, and the shop owners must know exactly how much badgering you'll get from your children, given their prices.

Saint Elmo is the pyrorium's only whale shark, and an impressive spectacle. I do worry about the smallness of his tank, but he seems happy enough, and a constant stream of copper chloride is pumped in to keep the fire blue: his favourite habitat, so the placards say.

However, even His Holiness is but a bit player compared to some of the stars there. But as for who the main attractions are, well, I have to keep some suspense, don't I?

With that said, my time in Darkton came to a close. I packed my bags, said my thanks to the staff at Kiah Oclash, and drove off, a few souvenirs bouncing around in my boot.

Only as I was leaving did I notice a new sign.

'Surfing lessons available' (it said) and in my side-mirrors I could see cave-painting figures rolling along the blaze.

I guess I'll be returning at some point to check that out.

TLDR: 4.7 Stars. Darkton is a fun and affordable sea-side resort, suitable for all ages. Don't bother with sunscreen, but be aware of breathing difficulties the transition may cause. Psychological discrepancies may result during or after a visit due to the Place's nature. If any occur, please contact your nearest professional in such matters. Our website offers several potential cover stories if you can't find anyone in the know.

MARYAM AHMED

Evanescent

This isn't one of those 'once upon a time' kind of fairy tales. Those kinds of stories typically end happily ever after. There is no 'happily' in how this story ends; there's only ever after.

We start our story in an old forgotten time in the Kingdom of Aziel. The Kingdom was ruled by a kind and fair King who valued the happiness of his people. The sun always shone bright upon Aziel as if the sky itself were smiling down on the people and providing them with safety and warmth. The Kingdom flourished and all were happy in their community. That was until darkness crept in and changed the story.

A wind blew in from the East, bringing with it a man who was so greedy for power that he would stop at nothing to take it. An army of men stormed towards the Kingdom, attacking and pillaging the peaceful people of Aziel, stealing, and spreading darkness with every step. The King couldn't bear to watch his people suffer and so the Royal Guard rose to their people's aid and war ripped through the Kingdom. Blood spilled and stained the ground of Aziel. The people fought long and hard against the army of the East with their King bravely by their side.

War only ended when the clouds pulled together darkly and cast a blanket of darkness over the Kingdom. A shadow sliced through the sky and parted the earth. Taking out soldiers left and right, the Beast was merciless as it swept through the war. The Beast was made of black with large wings that sliced through the air at such a speed that the King didn't stand a chance. The death of the King brought Aziel to its knees and the Kingdom fell.



The Beast seemed to dissolve into the fog just as soon as it first appeared. A new, ruthless, and cold King was crowned and the grey mist that suffocated the Kingdom never rose. Tales of The Great Beast was banned from being uttered amongst the town's folk. But no one had forgotten that day. No one could forget how the shadows had melted together to make a monster; the monster that painted Aziel forever red.

PART I



The rope burned harshly against his skin and kept his wrists tightly bound together, making sure to leave no wriggle room. The air was heavy with struggle as Kenji tried to pull out of the man's hands. His breath was ragged, and his saliva was lodged in his throat, making it near impossible for him to swallow. He could feel his heart slam against his ribcage as the hands roughly gripped his arms and pushed him out of the house. He partially blamed himself for the situation he was in. He knew he should have run when he had the chance.



Kenji had lived by himself for almost two weeks after his mother's untimely death. His father had died years prior in the war and Kenji barely remembered him. All he could place on his father's face were his eyes and he could only 'remember' them because his mother had always told him: 'You have your father's eyes.' So, he wasn't sure if he could remember them or if he was just seeing his own.

His mother had died two weeks ago from a sickness that couldn't be treated with any of the herbs or natural remedies. He had tried everything to try and lessen his mother's pain, but in the end, it was futile. One morning he found her lying on her bed. Her eyes open, a vacant stare scarred into her tight skin.



After burying her, Kenji had desperately considered fleeing the Kingdom. He had no means of income and could barely support himself. He knew how to hunt and sometimes he was lucky and got a few small birds to cook or trade, but now that he was alone he couldn't leave his house empty. Thieves were more common than honest people. That, and if he were caught fleeing, the crime was punishable by death. Although he didn't have much to live for, he didn't want to die just yet. He thought he was too young and handsome to be wasted.

'Where are you taking me?' he demanded as the man pushed him onto a horse-drawn cart which held a few other kids who looked late into their teens, like he was.

The guard smirked arrogantly before climbing in the cart once everyone was loaded on and locked the door before speaking.

'You know where,' he replied as he loaded his crossbow with an arrow just in case anyone tried to pull a runner.



The guard was right. Kenji did know where they were going but he had still hoped he could be wrong. The King called it a favouring scheme, but Kenji knew that was just an excuse for the enslavement of kids who had no choice. As much as he didn't want to work for the King, he also didn't want to slowly starve on the streets with no dignity.

They rode through the town and up towards the castle. The thatched houses rolled by monotonously, pairing perfectly against the permanent dismal grey sky that echoed the cold air that choked the people. Kenji watched as the town's people traded what little they had for basic supplies and bread. They pulled desperately at the thin sheets that clothed their bodies, trying to keep the chill out. Kenji remembered a time when the sun shone over Aziel. He remembered his mother handing him a little hessian satchel of pennies every



so often as a treat and he'd race over to the marketplace and buy a caramelized apple that had been freshly picked that morning. He could still feel his teeth breaking through the hardened caramel; he felt the sour apple juice dribble past his lips and down his chin. The taste of home always melted in his memory. But Aziel didn't taste of home anymore.

As the cart pulled into the castle courtyard Kenji felt the blood in his veins turn cold. The air was sour and bleak and if he breathed hard enough, he could watch his warm breath escape past his lips and twitch and struggle against the cold until it too was fully consumed.

The guard jumped off the back of the cart and unlocked the door, letting it down slowly as Kenji and the other kids wobbled off. Kenji recognized him from all of the King's public appearances and the fair few executions. He was Kye, Captain of the Royal Guard. His father had served by the new King's side in the war and like father like son, Kye was sculpted out of ice.

'Right, listen up because I don't want to repeat myself got it?'

Kye's voice was laced with annoyance.

Kenji could have scoffed (if he didn't value his life) at the audacity.

'All the girls go to the servants' quarters left of the stairs and the head maiden will meet you there and give you your list of jobs,' Kye explained boredly. Kenji couldn't help but wonder how many times he'd given this same speech.

'And you lot,' Kye addressed the boys, 'you'll be trained to be soldiers in the Royal Guard.'

The boys exchanged worried glances with each other, and a few whispers of worry and fear floated through the air, but they all knew there was no arguing. Kenji would have chosen pouring molten lava in his eyes over serving the King, let alone fighting for

him and his evil regiments. He bit back an argument and let Kye untie his wrists as the gate that secured entrance and exit to the courtyard slid closed heavily. This would be his new life and he couldn't escape it no matter how desperately he wanted to.

PART II

Icy water shot through Kenji's body as he gasped in shock and sat up, gulping down fresh air, and looking around him wildly for the culprit.

'Wake up already!'

A young voice filled his ears and he immediately felt annoyance rise in his chest.

He glared hard at the boy as he wiped water out of his right eye.

'You better have a good reason for almost drowning me, Erson,' he warned the boy and got out of his soaked bed sheets and made his way over to his small cupboard.

Erson was a year younger than Kenji and had the energy of an angry bull 24/7. He had been a shy kid when he was first recruited to join the Royal Guard but had been stuck to Kenji like glue ever since Kenji had stood up for him against Kye in the mess hall one time. Kenji had since asked himself if the lashings he'd received as punishment for speaking out of turn were worth his new shadow.

'We're getting our assignments today, remember? We're finally going to actually do something worthwhile around here,' Erson explained as he tightened his small blonde ponytail.

Kenji let out a heavy breath as he remembered what today was. He peeled his wet shirt off his back and dropped it to the floor. He caught a glimpse of himself in a small mirror that hung against the wall sadly. It had a crack running right through the

middle diagonally and one of the bottom corners was missing but Kenji could still make out his face and how it had changed since he'd been taken from his home. He was twenty-one now and he had the body to match. He wasn't buff or jacked but he had been close to resembling a stick when he was first brought to the castle. Now, with a good, healthy diet and plenty of exercise Kenji was toned just right.

He brushed his wet hair out of his eyes and sighed as he realised his hair would be damp for the rest of the morning. His hair was longer than it had ever been before, and he couldn't make his mind up and decide whether he loved it or hated it. It tickled the back of his neck and curled around his ears in black waves. He knew it complimented his sharp eyes but was never sure when he was in need of a trim.

'And what if your assignment is just a lookout or a watcher?' Kenji asked as he grabbed a fresh shirt and pulled it on before switching his shorts for black trousers.

Erson shrugged.

'Then I hope it's in the castle with all those maids,' he said cheekily and wiggled his eyebrows.

Kenji breathed out an airy laugh and threw his damp underwear at Erson, making the younger boy yelp and duck to dodge it.

'Head out of the clouds, idiot.'

He rolled his eyes and tied his belt around his waist.

'Never say never, Kenny,' Erson hummed as he got up, knowing how much Kenji hated that nickname and anticipated another attack of wet clothing to be thrown in his direction.

Kenji pulled his eyebrows together.

'Call me that again and I'll tell all the maids you've got TB,' he threatened the blonde-haired boy.

Erson gasped in betrayal.

'You wouldn't.'

'Try me, kid.'

The newly trained boys had finally passed every test of courage and skill to determine them and their rank and jobs within the Royal Guard. A few hadn't made the cut at all and had either been assigned to another task to help the Crown or were sent back to the village to find a regular job among the local people. There were six new additions that had made it past every single test and passed with enough skill that Kye believed they would be most useful in close proximity to the castle.

Kye went along the line of boys and assigned each of them a specific job to do, which varied from lookout shifts to personal guards of the King.

'You'll be stationed at the gate,' Kye said as he looked through the paper on his clipboard and addressed Erson, who was standing in front of him. 'There are two other guards up there who'll show you the ropes and decide where you're best fitted,' he explained as Erson nodded in understanding and slightly bowed out of respect for his Captain.

'Yes sir.'

Kye hummed in response before taking one more step and reaching the end of the line where Kenji stood. The two had never gotten along due to Kye's arrogant, rule-following nature and Kenji's liberal, rule-breaker way of life.

Kenji watched as Kye raised an eyebrow in question at the paper before his confusion stretched into a knowing smile as he read over Kenji's chosen assignment.

'You're in the castle. Dungeon duty,' he said simply before turning on his heel to walk away.

‘What? Wait, that’s it?’ Kenji gasped in confusion and looked around at the other boys before looking back to Kye for more of an explanation. ‘Who do I go to? What will my job be? Anything?’ he said, exasperated. ‘I don’t even know the way to the dungeons.’

The Captain stopped upon hearing the bombardment of questions before barely looking back over his shoulder.

‘Follow me,’ was all he said before he carried on walking.

Kenji raised an eyebrow but didn’t question it as he looked over at Erson and gave him a mock salute to wish him luck on his first day on duty and jogged to catch up to Kye but stayed a few steps behind.

The two crossed the courtyard and through the servants’ quarters and into the castle. It was the first time Kenji had seen inside the castle and to say he was underwhelmed was an understatement. He had expected chandeliers of glass and diamonds and stairs of gold. He had imagined marble floors that were so polished you could see your reflection in them and large stained-glass windows of all the colours of the rainbow. What he did not expect was the dull grey flooring that felt rough under the soles of his boots. The stairs were made of redwood that looked cold to touch and the doors to the rooms matched the wooden stair railings. At least the windows were large, larger than he could have imagined, albeit they were plainly paned and told no stories with any arrays of colours.

Kenji followed Kye down a winding staircase that seemed to go on forever before reaching a black gate which Kye unlocked and walked through. This was the dungeon. A basement that smelled of damp and sweat. There was a small table on their left where three guards sat on duty, but the cells were mostly empty. A few prisoners sat quietly in their stone cells whilst others muttered to themselves and scratched into the walls desperately with their fingernails. Kenji

prepared himself to introduce himself to the other guards, but Kye kept on walking down the hallway lined with cells.

'Where are you going?' Kenji asked in confusion as he again had to jog over to catch up to his Captain.

Kye smirked slyly.

'Oh, you're not up here,' he said as though it were obvious.

Kenji slightly narrowed his eyes but didn't say anything as he followed Kye to the end of the hallway where there was another door but this one was different. This one was heavy duty with three different sets of locks and a slab of wood wedged between a slot lock on the door so that it couldn't be pushed opened from the other side. There was an inscription dug into the centre of the door. Just one word that sent chills racing through Kenji's body: Hell.

'What is this?' Kenji asked in confusion as Kye unlocked all the different locks and removed the wooden slab and pushed the door open.

As soon as the door was opened, it creaked loudly and filled Kenji's ears and made his heart race. Darkness seemed to spawn from behind the door as it was all Kenji could see for miles and miles. He gulped thickly and felt the hairs on the back of his neck stick up.

'Stay close,' Kye said as he grabbed a burning torch hung up on the wall outside of the door before walking into the darkness.

Kenji didn't fancy a third jog, so he stuck closely behind Kye and followed his every step of the way as they both made their way down another flight of steep winding stairs. The air got colder as the darkness got darker, the deeper into Hell they got.

They finally reached the end of the stairs and Kye walked over to the wall and then turned to look at Kenji. His menacing smirk danced across his face as the fire flickered teasingly.

'You believe in the devil?' Kye asked slowly.

‘What the hell is that supposed to mean? What is this?’ Kenji demanded. A sick feeling was making a pit in his stomach, churning, and twisting harshly.

Kye shrugged smugly as he held up his torch.

‘Try not to faint, yeah?’ he said, and before Kenji could say anything in return, he lit the torch on the wall with his own and Kenji’s body went stiff.

There was another presence in the room. He felt it as soon as the dim fire granted him enough light to see out of the corner of his eye. He slowly pivoted on his heel and looked towards his right. His eyes dragged down the black chains that were buried deep in the stone and stretched down to a pair of hands that were being held up. Kenji’s heart stopped beating when he made eye contact with it; a boy with blood stained eyes and large black wings.

RACHEL BROWN

Curses

A dizzying thwack of pain jolts Matthew from a dream, making him think, fleetingly, of concrete. As his eyes adjust to the gloom he realises he's headbutted the corner of his bedside drawers. The two fingers he presses to the swelling come away wet, sticky.

Hey you, I see you.

You little bitch, he thinks, before turning on the bedside light and scanning the room to check he's alone. The green glow of the alarm clock reads 4.44am.

It's the fourth time this week that he's had an accident, and he's starting to feel uneasy. They've all been minor – no car wreckages or broken limbs – but the regularity of their occurrences has prompted him to wonder about the meaning behind those last, passionate words Adriana hissed at him in Portuguese. The wild look in her eyes as she'd widened them and held his gaze kept flickering into his consciousness, unwanted, at unexpected times: on the football pitch at Chelsea vs Arsenal, on the dashboard as he'd steered left into the gym carpark, in the corner of the cellar as he'd stooped to get a bottle of wine – that last one had really freaked him out.

At first it had been brilliant with Adriana. She was hot, God yes – people would double-take when she shook her hair in the street, and once, when they were having dinner in Sketch, a stranger had high-fived him in the toilets. Sometimes he thought her voice was too low to be sexy, and he didn't like the way she'd shout excitedly about what appeared to be nothing, but her body – wow – was something else. A tiny waist blossomed into curvy thighs; her skin

was the same colour and texture as burnished olive oil, even though she'd spent the summer in Brixton, not Brazil. And although he didn't understand everything she said to him in bed, he was pretty sure he got the gist, and she took the lead in that department in any case.

But after a couple of months of wild sex and passionate arguments, sleepless nights and three espressos to get through morning meetings, Matthew had started to get a little tired. He cringed when she leapt on top of him, he worried about what the foreign murmurs meant, he wanted to go back to being in control, being on top, or even better, to just being asleep.

He'd read *Jane Eyre* at school and knew only too well the havoc a mad Bertha could cause from the attic if left to fester. So, on Saturday he'd ended the relationship – although in London, what they'd had wasn't really a *relationship*, he'd explained, before she'd slapped him across the face. Despite the tears, he'd woken up on Sunday morning, alone, and felt quite pleased with himself for the rest of the day.

On Monday, the shower head had fallen and clunked against his skull with a resounding crack. He'd actually seen stars, and was so disorientated he'd slipped in the bathtub, jolting straight onto his coccyx. He might not have thought anything of it, except that the shower had bonked him at the precise moment he'd started to think about Beth from Goldman Sachs, and all of that blonde hair she kept twiddling when she leant over the computer to speak to him.

You know what is a barata, Matthew?

Tuesday's incident had been equally inconsequential, but he still bore the scald marks. He'd been cooking while taking a late-night

call from a client, phone clamped to his chin. He'd lifted a ladleful of steaming Thai red curry to his mouth, missed, and spilt it; branding his chin with what looked like two tiny red fangs. The next day they'd started to peel, leaving rubbery purple slits behind, despite the bag of frozen peas he'd held to his face.

On Wednesday he'd woken early to squeeze in a swim before a breakfast meeting. Twenty laps in, he tore off his goggles and paused to catch his breath. Noticing a lithe, tan body push off next to him he set off too, doing fast, long strokes to catch her up, opening his eyes under water to get a better look. It was only as he felt the sting to his eyeballs that he realised in his haste he'd forgotten to put his goggles back on. He spluttered to the surface, choking chlorine in his panic, but it was too late. His contact lenses had fallen out, and his eyeballs were feeling scratched. Itchy. He could swear he could hear a gentle female chuckle as he left the pool early, blinking, to make an emergency trip home to retrieve the glasses he hated before meeting his client late, harassed, and looking like a version of himself that he'd tried to forget.

This way you act, it's not normal.

And now this, a head wound. He's never, in his eight years of living in the flat, headbutted his chest of drawers. Not even close. Could she...? Could she...? The word sticks, even though it's been hovering since the shower accident... have *cursed* him? The flashing 4.44 on the clock reminds him of something Adriana would say about repetitions of numbers. Angel numbers, she called them, a message from another dimension. She had a strong conviction in the power of the spirit world, inspired by a brief dabble in Candomblé back in Brazil. The meditation station she'd constructed in her bedroom looked like a witch's altar and was one of the reasons he'd insisted they should spend most of their time at his.

He takes his phone from its charging stand and googles 444. Over nine million results come back. He scans the links, seeing the same words on loop: 'love', 'guidance', 'nothing to fear'. His heart rate slows, a new thought occurring – perhaps it's a love spell, not a curse? Enthusiastically he scrolls on, only to meet an abrupt change of theme. 'Bad luck number' and 'danger' churn on repeat, until finally **'a message of warning about a severe accident or death'** appears in bold. Shit. He throws the phone on the floor and turns on the big light, then the TV, the background hum of 24-hour BBC news soothing him, somewhat, until it's time to go to the safety of the office.

He spots Beth as he arrives at the lifts.

'You look. . .' Her eyes scan up and down his body, resting upon his face. 'Different. Are you ok?'

He catches sight of his reflection in the mirrored walls. Thick glasses. A shiny, weeping bump on his forehead. Two purple slits starting to crust around his mouth, looking like his childhood recurring impetigo. He limps into the lift, still sore from the shower fall.

'Yeah, yeah, all good.' He holds his coffee in front of his mouth to disguise the scabs. 'Had a bit of a late one, you know? Burning the candle at both ends.'

Beth nods, sympathetically. 'I hear you. Are you going to be ok for tomorrow?'

'Tomorrow?' He tries to remember if he's invited her for a date already.

'The charity abseil in Stratford. You know, the ArcelorMittal Orbit – wasn't it your idea?'

'Of course.' His stomach churns as he opens his phone to check his calendar. 'Can't wait!'

Tomorrow's date stares back. Friday 13th.

He's breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth, counting one second longer on the out breath than the in breath, the way he learned in management training. For the fifth time he fiddles with his clips, checking he's still strapped in, as he gently releases the rope to continue his journey down. The wind at this height is biting, the city a jagged tangle of grey squares. The red bars of the sculpture he's descending twist like gnarled claws, the colour of warning.

He risks a look down to the ground below, now able to see, amid the expanse of green shapes and grey buildings, the wiggling Thames between them, a row of tiny faces dotted like upturned flowers. As he draws closer to earth – surely only 20 metres away by now? – his eyes lock onto a figure in the crowd, illuminated by the flashing lights of a food stall behind her. Dark eyes centred in a glowing, beautiful face, waist-length hair flowing out from a baseball cap, he's sure it's Adriana. She's wearing one of those baggy shirts he hates. And she seems to be staring right at him. From a distance her arm lifts, as if in a wave.

Why are you always so scared, of this, of that?

The rope suddenly slackens. He flails left then right, the red piping looming closer before jerking away; there's nothing solid for him to grip onto. He spins on his axis, so hot all of a sudden, and dizzy, nausea bubbling in his stomach and threatening to—

Faces loom over him, slowly taking shape amongst the carousel of dappling lights in his vision. His safety instructor is unhooking his harness; he's blissfully motionless against the hard ground.

'What happened?' he gasps. 'What did she do?'

‘You fainted mate, don’t worry. You’re not the first, and I’m sure you won’t be the last.’

‘But... the rope! It came loose, how did I get—’

‘I lowered you down. You were nearly there anyway, looked like you started panicking when you saw the ground. Your rope is fine, look! You’re ok.’

Matthew gingerly takes off his helmet, checking his legs, hands, elbows. Aside from feeling sore, his instructor is right. He’s ok.

And then she’s there, those eyes that have haunted him now glaring down at him. Angry. Black. Powerful.

They sit in the visitor café – a tea for him, nothing for her. As he stirs sugar into his mug she watches him, the deep indent of her left dimple twitching. Her wrists are delicate in the oversized shirt, her right thumb fidgeting with her handbag strap as if she’s making the sign of the cross.

His fear has been replaced by a tummy ache, not dissimilar to the nausea he felt when he was spinning adrift. He’s overwhelmed by the desire to get into bed, pull his quilt over his head, and try to forget this week has ever happened.

‘You look so sad, Matthew. Why are you sad?’

‘I’m not *sad*, I nearly died! I collapsed on a rope in front of my colleagues, I thought...’ He falters, as he realises that the ache in his stomach does, in fact, feel like sadness. ‘I thought it was the end.’

Adriana smirks. ‘For an English man, you are dramatic.’ The smirk turns to a grimace as she notices his scabs. ‘What happened to your face?’

He fingers them with one hand, thoughtfully. ‘You know, I thought you’d cursed me.’

She snorts. ‘Cursed you? Because you fainted?’

‘No, because I’ve been having all these accidents! Falling over, hitting my head, burning myself, something bad’s happened every day since we broke up! And you hissed those words last week as if you were casting a spell, I didn’t know what they meant!’

She stops smiling and leans in, staring intently. ‘Did you ever think about asking me what I said? What I think, how I feel?’

He squirms as he meets her gaze; challenging, familiar. ‘I think...’ He clutches his mug with both hands. ‘I was afraid of the answer.’

‘Go on?’

‘I think... maybe I’m not used to feeling vulnerable.’

‘You don’t say,’ she laughs. ‘Maybe abseiling isn’t for you.’

‘Adriana,’ he gulps, ‘I’ve been such an idiot. Can we just go home together, now? Is that why you’re here?’

She throws back her head and laughs again. ‘You think it’s all about you, don’t you? You hit your head, Adriana did it. You faint, it’s her fault. You like me, so now I have to forgive you. I’m here, it must be because of you.’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘No, it isn’t! I’m here on a date. With Gareth. He took me for dinner last night and we’re going for cocktails once he’s made it back down from his abseil.’

Gareth is an uptight man who works in compliance on the top floor and was fawning over Adriana the night Matthew met her at the member’s club. Matthew has seen him put shoehorns in his loafers while he goes to the gym on lunch breaks.

‘You are joking.’

‘I’m not. Look, you take care now Matthew, and grow up. The world is bigger than you, you know?’

She leaves the café, swinging the door shut without looking back.



Matthew looks at the door for a long time afterwards, before politely refusing Beth's invitation for a drink and taking the tube home, alone, to take a hot bath, lighting the scented candle Adriana left behind.

As he drifts into a warm, fragrant sleep, he doesn't hear the crackle as the wick sets the holder alight or see the explosion of tiny blobs of blazing wax floating down to surround him like a halo, or notice the entrails of black smoke, gently gathering speed, wisping up to the steamy ceiling in the shape of a question mark.

Na cama que farás, nela te deitarás.

You lie in the bed you make, Matthew, you'll see.

SINEAD SILVIE COX

*sorry grandma, i did not read the bible,
and i did not go to church*

sometimes i wish to believe in a god, in a higher being, so then i can believe that you are still here, that you are somewhere, in a better place, called the better place by those wishing to comfort me, waiting for me to join you, and you are watching me still, and you found relief past a deep and eternal sleep, that this god can hear my cries, they can see my pain, and when i reach this place, they will take me to you, and my faith in them will be rewarded, with your face and your warmth, but i cannot believe, because why would such a being, so strong and so loving, create such a thing as love, and make us suffer so much, and create me with shortcomings, and create you with illness, all the while they are watching, claiming their love for us, while their creations are half-hearted, half-finished things, with flaws like hatred, and urges like violence, and you argue it is our free-will, gifted to us from this being, that has made us this way, but why cannot this free-will cure my innate grief, why did it give me my addictive disposition, and how could this being give me free-will, if this is what i used, to watch you leave me, and how could they give me the free-will, the audacity, to continue to breathe long after you stopped, this free-will that is no gift, no blessing, because that would make me responsible for remaining, for staying behind, for watching you leave and not following, and this free-will makes me cruel, makes me selfish, and what good is free-will, if i cannot use it for good, if i cannot use it to save you, and i should believe that this higher being has given me such a curse as feeling, as watching, and knowing that i cannot stop the inevitable, and they want me to believe and worship and



love them when they have given me such pain, when they have taken half of my heart away to the place that they have created for our dead, and they did not take the other half, so that they are holding the other half of my heart and they will not give it back, no matter how much i scream, or cry, or beg for it, they are deaf to my grief, and they do not send me rays of sun for comfort, and they do not give me signs in the stars, they only listen, with half of my heart in their sky, while i am here on the ground, only half a heart, half a person, cursed with love, cursed by this higher being to live, while you do not.

so i do not believe in a god, in a higher being, because what better place is there for you, than with me, by my side, so that i can protect you, and comfort you, and you can protect me, and comfort me, so that the halves of our heart can be whole, and we do not have to feel such pain, so that you do not have to leave me, and i do not have to live while you do not, so that i do not have to breathe while you do not, and i do not have to walk on earth while you are beneath it.



JOSH H PHELPS

A Boy Breaks a Window

She shudders and pulls her grey jacket closer round her neck as the draught picks up once again. The week has shown well enough that a piece of cardboard, a bin liner and some shreds of flaky sellotape can't hold their own against the relentless winter breeze. She rubs a finger under her damp red nose, checks it for any specks of burgundy from this morning's nosebleed – all clear – wipes it on her scratchy collar and stuffs it back under her armpit. Kev said he'd get it sorted quick like he got the washing machine sorted in a quick two months, which was supposedly 'no big fuss' because a friend let her use theirs. Of course he's still haggling, so shocked that no one would quote him a 'reasonable price'. Appalling, this country's gone right down the toilet, ain't it? She shivers, brooding over the piece of her mind she'd like to give to the little punk that did it and cackled as he fled like a poltergeist. As much as she'd like to give him a piece of her mind, she probably wouldn't say a word, not even if she had him by the scruff of his neck. What good would cussing out a kid do? She definitely doesn't want him (by which she meant his mum) to pay for the window, Kev will cover that. Eventually. She yawns, a faint plume of fog forms then fades before her. Foggy breath, in her own home. It's not like she doesn't have anywhere else she can go; her local pub is always cheap and cosy, and her parents are only a couple hours away by train. She's scared that someone might get in through the window while she's away. Someone absolutely could, it's a big enough hole with no jagged pieces to unzip yourself on. If she stayed here, she could at least clobber them over the head with a vase as they crawled in, maybe that'll scare them off. Checking the time on her watch, she notices

the tip of her ring finger has gone pale and numb. She rises and places the fingertip in her mouth, just past the lips sitting neatly on her teeth, and grabs her icy keys off the coffee table beside her. Fuck it, she's going to the pub.

MONDAY-MALACHI ROSENFELD

Pasta For Two

1. Put 150g of pasta, preferably conchiglie, in a pot.
2. Add boiling water and once it is cooked, strain almost all the water, replacing it with tomato soup.
3. Stir in garlic, butter, and pepper, going heavy on the butter so it may keep you fat in the winter. Serve piping hot with a sprinkle of mature cheddar – if you can afford it.
4. When you eat the meal with mum, thank her for letting you help to cook it.
5. Sit on the sofa and wish you'd gotten more of the garlic but enjoy it nonetheless when you get a bigger chunk that dodged the knife's dice.
6. Ask mum if you can have another bowl and secretly know she can't afford to say yes.
7. Know that the soup was 17p and the garlic was 30p a bulb.
8. Know that it was a meal crafted with seventy-two pence and love, served to you specifically to protect you from the harsh December nights.
9. Notice that the steam coming from the pasta makes it more difficult to see your breath in the downstairs living room. It's by design.
10. Only understand several years after the fact why your mum was so grateful for your love of this meal.
11. Cook the same pasta every December for the next seven years, each time with the garlic content costing you an extra penny.

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- I2. Lovingly serve it to your next of kin when the next cold, poor December arrives and hope that maybe it will provide them the same warmth. Hope maybe they will find the same raw love in the chunks of garlic you couldn't quite dice.
 - I3. Understand that it will only ever be the same meal so long as it is born from an innate desire to protect. The unstoppable urge to love.
 - I4. Pray that in 50 years the meal will become a familial passion instead of a survival-based, poverty-induced necessity. Pray that it will be viewed with the same amount of admiration without the fine print of using only the cheapest ingredients.
 - I5. Pray it'll become a story of winter joy and warmth, a testament to our ability to endure. Hope that when the children of your children make the same meal, they get to do it without preparing all the ingredients first to save gas.
 - I6. Hope the children of your children make the meal in the first place. It's too good to be lost to the tales of breadlines and hostels.
 - I7. Wash up your bowls and let your hands linger in the hot water. Give thanks for the warmth.
 - I8. Give thanks for your life, this day, this night, this meal.

Serves 2.

DESANTILA QERIMAJ RRANXA

The Man On The Bicycle

Every day the same memories return to him; Edward will never abandon them! At 5pm he prepares his tea with solemn punctuation, drinks it with the same biscuits, milk, cup. As a former journalist, he is accustomed to reading the newspaper first, but only stares into the paper while his rocking chair lulls him with even movements. He thinks about the tenderness of a sunny afternoon approaching in spring. The window, the curtains, the floor, the paintings, even his hands seem wrapped in the warmest shade while all surrenders to the pink skies ahead. They don't have the pang of his memories; they are just soft colours that flow from far into his white hair and his eyes. Now he holds a book on his chest, he closes his eyes for a few seconds getting his heart ready for the second part of his reading. He reads poems for about half an hour knowing this is the only real reading for him. He pictures her fingers, her pen, and her writing when, with a kiss in the air, she wrote him the dedication. Since then, the book has grown old with him. How well he remembers the pages; how easily he embraces the reverberation of her words and the image of that long-gone afternoon. Then he is drawn into sleep. His dreams will never abandon his memories either!

He recollects the call, the old black phone, his small apartment, the urgency of her voice that still descends in his afternoon sleeps. 'Father must leave the country immediately. Hurry up! I'm waiting for you by the corner shop.' Edward plans the route full of checkpoints. He knows how to get to her mansion in less than five minutes. Moreover, his bicycle never lets him down. He pulls on his shirt and his suit frenetically, imagining the thrill her large eyes bring him. Then he slams shut the green door of his apartment



and stumbles down the three flights of stairs to the ground floor. The building is old and beige. The air raids have left their traces in some deep cracks on the first-floor wall. He recalls how her dazzling laughter turns into an awkward one if a huge spider creeps quickly into the open and back into the dark just as quickly. His energy is strenuous, awake, over-alert. A man running towards his blossomed garden, he is now an athlete that jumps over half a floor gripping the iron rails. As usual his bicycle awaits him at the underground gate. The only thing that remains is the road, himself, and the bicycle. Nothing more!

The dream ends abruptly, scattering everywhere her warm golden hair, magnolia scent and her countenance. When Edward wakes up and looks out of the window the pink sky has become grey. He thinks the capricious power of the clouds resembles his life; the same capricious change of fate that for years has come between her and his efforts to find her. Then he shivers. He embraces the book as if it is a child that needs protecting, stretches in his rocking chair, gazing at the road. The man on the bicycle is still there. He hurries in vain every day and never reaches her.



JADA SCOTT

Things I Wish I'd Said.

The room had a lot of brown earthy tones like sienna and walnut. It was in the paintwork and the furniture which made the room feel warm and comforting. The chair I sat on was cold, leather rough, wrinkled like an elephant's skin. It rubbed against my own skin as I crossed and uncrossed my legs, pulling down my hiking skirt. I picked at the chipped black polish of my nails, and while staring at the floor I felt sympathetic eyes framed by auburn curls and glasses glance my way from opposite me.

'How are you today, Leah?'

I wondered if she wanted me to reply honestly. Because if she did, I would probably say I feel like the world isn't ending, but I want it to.

'I'm fine,' I replied. Eyes glued to a light patch on the brown-speckled carpet.

'That's good. So, no new problems then since the last session?'

I breathed slowly as I twirled the pearl ring on my right index finger around. What does she consider a problem? I don't sleep, but neither do any teens I know. My eating habits are shit but whose aren't? Things have happened, but it seems to happen to all women. I talk about death but so does everyone, we've all joked about it!

'Nope, no problems since last time,' I replied.

'Good, good. And how are you finding the medication?'

Honestly, it makes me feel kind of numb, like every feeling has been muffled, dampened. It is nice in comparison to the crushing overwhelmingness I used to feel, but still isn't what I expected when I first considered recovery. I'm scared soon I'll mistake numb for normal.

I wish I could've said this but instead, I bit the inside of my cheek.

'Things are better, yeah.'

'That's good. You're showing significant improvement, Leah.'

Am I? Do you want to know the reason I'm lying to this woman, with her kind eyes and sincere expression of worry? It's because although I'm scared of what would happen if I didn't get better, I'm terrified of what would happen if I did. This is all I've known. Will I even be me if I wasn't like this? I don't want to lose everything, lose the me I've grown used to being. Will everyone still love me if I'm not like this? Will he?

'Thank you,' I replied.

'So, what would you like to happen next?' she asked as she leaned in closer.

'I don't know.'

In all honesty, I just want to be happy, but happiness seems so far out of reach and feels like too much effort to obtain, so I have thought about giving up, but I couldn't, could I? With family and friends that love me, my boyfriend. I couldn't leave them behind. So...

I looked Dr Bell in the eyes for the first time since I'd sat down. And with tears dripping down my face I said, 'I think... I want to start telling the truth.'

It was my third appointment.

But it was at my first where I probably told Dr Bell things closer to the whole truth.

I remember it like it was yesterday. It was the first time I had ever been in a therapy room, but it had seemed so familiar. That didn't stop the hairs on my skin from standing on their edge, and the chill in the room from the cracked window didn't help.

'You can sit down,' Dr Bell said gesturing to the brown leather sofa in front of me.

'Okay,' I said sheepishly and sat down.

'So, Leah, why do you think you're here?'

'Because my mum thinks I've not been right since... the incident.'

'What incident is that, Leah?'

'Well, I'm sure my mum's told you.'

'But I'd like to hear from you.'

'Well on a night out I got really drunk, I don't remember much of it, but a guy sexually harassed me, or at least, I think that's what the phrase is.'

I remember every detail of what happened, but recalling, especially to a random woman I've just met isn't something I think I can do. At least not right now. I was with my friends. We went clubbing. I was having a great time but got handed drink after drink. I ended up kissing Blake. He took things too far. I pushed him away. I said no but he wouldn't listen. I can still feel his hands on my throat, his breath on my face, his fingers tracing my body sending an icy chill down my spine. I left the club, alone. I remember going home that night and crying in the shower, tears intertwining with the running water, scrubbing my skin raw in an attempt to erase the memory of his touch. I also remember finally telling someone about it, how hard it was to admit it, words held back by the fear of being called a liar.

My body tensed at the memory, so I shrugged my shoulders and proceeded.

'I told a close friend, who told my mum who strongly suggested that I sought help and here I am.'

'Okay, so how did this incident make you feel?'

Like shit obviously, I got so depressed and anxious. I wouldn't leave the house, everything was difficult, and I was terrified it would happen again.

'Not great, it hasn't been easy, I haven't left the house much. It's one of the reasons my mum was so worried.'

'Ah, I see. So would you say this situation has really affected you negatively and has made normal everyday activities difficult?'

No shit, Sherlock.

'Yes.'

'And would you say you have a consistently low mood?'

'Yes.'

'Trouble sleeping?'

'Yes.'

'Any changes in appetite?'

'I've been eating less or forgetting to eat.'

'Any panic or anxiety attacks?'

'Every time I leave the house.'

'Have you been able to maintain relationships or go out socially?'

'No. Also, I'm not sure if this is relevant but I'm always tense and my jaw is constantly clenched, plus according to my dentist I grind my teeth in my sleep.'

'Okay, thank you for letting me know. Have you had any thought of harming or killing yourself or feelings you'd be better off dead?'

It's not so much that I want to die or think I'll be better off dead, I just don't want to be here going through this. I want to stop feeling this way. It's like if not living means I'm free of this, then that's what I want. But I don't want to die. I just want to be me, but I don't know who that is without feeling like this, and it's terrifying when I think about the possibility of finding out.

'No.'

‘Okay, well Leah, from this assessment I think you are suffering from depression and probably anxiety possibly brought on by this “incident”, as you call it.’

Why does it feel like she’s telling me something I already know? I should be relieved, to finally know for certain but for some reason, it’s not that simple. I didn’t want to be depressed or anxious but having a diagnosis, an explanation, makes everything justified, it makes everything too real. I’m so confused, I don’t know what to think or do.

‘Okay,’ I replied.

‘So, I’d like to have some more sessions with you and in the next one I’d like us to dive a bit deeper into how you really feel and how this is affecting you so we can figure out how to best help you.’

‘Okay.’

So, I had another session in which I didn’t talk much. I guess I was withdrawn because I was so stuck in my head that I felt trapped. Constantly battling against whether to tell the whole truth and how much is too much?

It’s all too much, everyone just wants me to be better, I want to be better but it’s not something that will happen overnight. I know this. Yet there still seems to be this unsaid expectation that it will. So, I act better, say things are improving, say I’ve done all the homework for therapy, that I’m no longer stressed or low, I want so hard to scream the truth out loud but there’s this overwhelming feeling that it will do more bad than good.

That’s why I changed my mind in my third session and instead of telling Dr Bell exactly what I was thinking and feeling, I just said what I thought she would want to hear. I realised I’d been lost in thought when Dr Bell cleared her throat.

‘What’s the truth, Leah?’

'I've been really struggling recently but these sessions are really helping me, and I just want to thank you because if I'm honest I don't know how I'd be here without your help.'

'Oh Leah, I'm so glad to hear.'

See. I wasn't wrong. Everyone wants a quick solution, minimal effort, instant gratification, and I've just given that to Dr Bell, and she doesn't even know it.

That day when leaving therapy, I saw him. The guy who 'assaulted' me.

He looked at me from across the road and winked. It made my teeth clench, so I averted my eyes pretending not to notice and continued walking. He didn't like that, so he crossed the road and walked up to me.

'Hi, Leah.'

I couldn't avoid him.

'Hi Blake.' I replied eyes glued to his crisp white trainers.

'How've you been, I haven't seen you in a while.'

I didn't reply. Oxygen was hard to come by.

'Well, we should hang out soon...'. He said grazing my arm. Then he leaned in closer.

'... and maybe have a repeat of that night,' he whispered in my ear. I could feel him grinning like a Cheshire cat. He backed away slightly and lifted my chin with his hand so he could look me in the eyes.

'See you around,' he said with a smile. Then walked away.

I couldn't hear my heartbeat anymore because I'm pretty sure it shattered as he left. And I don't think anyone can help.

ADAM SKIPPER

Mother's Ashes

Dillon McGregor sat with his mother's ashes, all carefully scooped and piled up inside a chic black and silver urn that she would've hated.

'Where did she say she wanted to be scattered?'

He shook away the idea that he was holding his mum in a fancy vase, no bigger than a rugby ball, and stared at his wife. She had changed out of the morbid black dress and into her Sunday scrubs, which consisted of torn jeans, with splashes of white paint across the thighs, and a simple navy-blue top. She'd kept her hair tied up.

'Windermere,' he said, before standing and setting the urn on the windowsill. 'But I'm not going all the way to the Lake District. Not now.'

Tiffany rested a hand on a hip. 'It was her last wish to be scattered up there.'

'I know it was. But it's a five-hour drive. I'll have to stay the night, then come back. I can't afford the time.'

She twiddled the loose knot at the top of her head, and said carefully, 'It is where she wanted to be.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'I'm saying she can't stay here.'

Dillon looked at the urn, slightly off centre, next to the framed family photos.

'It's not so bad,' he said. 'Why can't she stay there for a bit?'

'Well, it's a bit grim, isn't it?'

Their son, James, came running through the living room in his pyjamas, and jumped into Dillon's lap. Dillon grabbed him, flipped

him over like he'd just caught a large carp and tickled him until he squealed. He was five years old and growing fast.

'Shouldn't you be in bed?' He stopped tickling so James could catch his breath.

Then James pressed his finger into Dillon's nose and said, 'Beep. Shouldn't *you* be in bed?'

Dillon couldn't help but smile. At best, he had three more years of this before James brought the hammer down and declared he was too old to be treated like a child.

'We will be soon,' Dillon said. 'We're just deciding on where to put Grandma.'

'In the garden.'

'In the garden?'

'We can grow a new Grandma.'

James laughed at his own joke, and Dillon and Tiffany smiled at each other.

'It's not such a bad idea,' she said. 'I read that it's not great for the environment to scatter ashes, anyway. It can have negative repercussions on the land. She would still be close to us, and we wouldn't have to see that thing every day.'

Dillon glanced at the urn, then he pushed his forehead, playfully, against James's. 'Is that what you want?'

'Yes!' James pumped a fist into the air, nearly clocking Dillon on the chin, and raced off to open the back door.

By the time Dillon had fetched a spade from the garden shed and dug a rough hole, one foot deep, it was already getting dark. He placed the urn inside, stood and, because he thought it felt right, he threw a handful of earth on top of the lid. Then he filled in the hole with the loose soil before carefully replacing the turf.

He thought he should say something, and settled on, 'I hope you're happy here, mum.' Then he went back inside, washed his hands and collapsed on to the sofa, next to Tiffany.

'Everything go okay?'

'Everything's fine.'

The next day, over breakfast, Dillon was sat at the dining table with his laptop and a slice of burnt toast, when Tiffany walked in.

'You know it's a bank holiday, don't you? You are allowed to take a day off.'

Dillon finished typing a sentence with a flourish, like he had finished his spreadsheet and was about to conduct an orchestra. 'For me, it's just a Monday. I need to get this down before the Board meet.'

'You need a day off. You're overworked as it is.'

'I had a day off yesterday.'

'You cremated your mother yesterday. It was hardly a spa day.'

Dillon took up the slice of toast and crunched down. 'I'm fine,' he said, spraying soggy, black crumbs about the keyboard.

Tiffany stared down at him, eyebrows pressed together. 'You haven't even remembered to put butter on your toast.'

There was a soft rumble, like a tiny herd of wildebeest were stampeding down the stairs.

'Here he is,' Dillon said, wiping a new cluster of crumbs from the laptop's screen, as James ran straight past him to press his face and hands against the back door window. 'No kiss for daddy?'

James just stood there, the condensation spreading and contracting with every breath.

Tiffany pushed the tub of butter closer to Dillon. 'At least try and pretend you're a functioning human being. If not for me, then for him.'

Dillon spread a healthy amount of butter over his cold piece of toast. It collected at the edges and when he ate it, it reminded him of dried dripping. He turned back to James, who hadn't moved.

'You okay, buster?'

'James,' said Tiffany, 'Daddy's talking to you.'

Without taking his face away from the window, James said, 'Grandma's waving at me.'

Dillon and Tiffany gave each other a quick glance, before she strode over to the back door.

She stared out of the window.

'Jesus Christ, Dillon. What did you do?'

Dillon dropped his piece of toast onto the plate. 'You know what I did.'

She turned to him, her eyebrows pressed together in that strange way he could never tell if she was joking or not. 'Do you think this is funny?'

He brushed his hands of crumbs and stood beside her at the back door. There, in the discoloured patch of grass he'd hacked up the night before, was what appeared to be an arm, buried up to the elbow, the fingers spread wide from the palm.

'I didn't do that.'

He snapped the bolt back and opened the door and, before he could stop him, James ran ahead. He caught him just as he was about to reach out and touch it. Tiffany came padding up behind, bare foot, the damp grass soaking into the hem of her jogging bottoms.

Sitting on his haunches, Dillon studied the strange object sticking out of the ground. It was gnarled and twisted, somewhere between an overgrown bonsai tree and a mummified limb. The brown strips of bark coiled around each other to form what looked like fingers. What made the appearance of the palm was

a knot of tendrils, like the head of a miniature tree that had lost all its leaves.

'We did it,' James jumped and spun on the spot. 'We grew a new Grandma. I'm going to get her some water.'

Tiffany caught him before he could get the garden hose. 'No. No water.'

'Mints, then. She loved mints.'

'Dillon, what is it?'

'I don't know. It grew too quick to be a tree.'

Tiffany gave a quick glance to the neighbouring windows. 'Do you think someone saw you? And now they're playing a sick joke?'

'I doubt it.'

Mr. Keighly was nearly ninety-years-old and Dillon couldn't imagine him abandoning his Zimmer frame, in the dead of night, to play a prank. On the other side were a young couple, who spent most of their time arguing or playing music or doing something else that involved doing it at full volume.

Tiffany tucked James behind her as best she could. He poked his head out, with a cheeky grin, as Dillon and Tiffany shared a silent, mutual thought.

Eventually, Tiffany breathed some life into it. 'Use weed killer.'

'I haven't got any. What would weed killer do?'

'Well, I don't know. What worked before?'

She just stared at him. He stared back.

He patted his pockets. 'I haven't got any cancer on me either.'

'Not for your mum, for this thing. You've killed a tree before.'

She was referring to the Sycamore that had been in the front garden and had threatened to fall on top of the house in the last storm. The council claimed they couldn't do anything about it, as it was still healthy, so Dillon had drilled numerous holes about

the trunk and poured as much of whatever he thought would kill it inside. It had worked. The council had chopped it down the following month.

‘This is too small for that,’ he said.

‘Then dig it up. Dig it up and get rid of it.’

Dillon’s phone rang from the dining table; small, jingling tones met them in the garden with an enthusiasm only James felt. He stood and went to answer it.

‘You can’t just leave this here.’

‘It’s not like it’s doing anything.’

Later that night, Tiffany watched the strange, tree shaped thing from their bedroom window. She was chewing her nails, stopping every now and then to spit out a shard of nail polish. When she had bitten down as far as she could, she moved on to the next finger without thought, as though she could bite the fingers of the tree down with every nibble.

‘I don’t like it,’ she said. ‘I don’t like it at all.’

‘Who would? It’s ugly.’

She turned to him, keeping the garden in the corner of her eye. ‘Not how it looks. How it came to be there.’

Dillon was sat cross-legged on the bed, laptop in position. ‘Didn’t you say ashes were bad for the environment?’

‘They can kill trees or something. The minerals or the carbon act like poison. Why?’

Dillon scrolled down the website’s page. ‘What can kill one thing could be steroids for another. Chocolate can kill dogs, but we grow fat from it.’

‘So?’

‘So, what if we’ve found a way of speeding something along?’

‘A tree? You think your mum’s ashes have helped grow a tree?’

'I don't know what it's done. But it's fascinating, isn't it?'

He went back to reading the article and Tiffany went back to staring out of the window, fingers in her mouth. She could barely see anything now; only her reflection, standing in darkness.

The next day, the first thing she did was check on the strange tree growing in the garden. Another one had grown out of the same spot, taller than the other. Still arm shaped, it had a similar hand at the top, clawing at the air, and where the elbow should have been, it looked broken, locked at a double-jointed angle.

The front door opened and closed, and Tiffany didn't move.

Dillon came through to the kitchen, and said, 'Having a pyjama party?'

She blinked at his voice. 'What?'

'You're still in your PJs. Didn't you get dressed today?'

She checked the clock on the wall. She had lost nine hours.

She blinked again. 'I got a little distracted.' She turned back to the window. 'There's another one, now.'

Dillon came up beside her and rested a hand on her waist, as she propped her head against his shoulder. He looked where she looked and his hand tightened around her.

'I have something for you,' he said. 'For us.'

He moved away and came back with a carrier bag. He pulled out a plastic container of weedkiller.

'I thought you said it wouldn't work. An axe would've been better.'

Dillon shrugged. 'It's worth a shot.'

He didn't need any time to think about it. He took a sharp kitchen knife and chopped into the plastic until he'd severed the small cap away from the body. Then he tipped the entire contents onto both of the arm shapes.

He thought he saw the small branches clench, slightly, and he took it as a good sign. He stepped back and took in the glistening trees, soaked in the chemicals. He dropped the plastic container with a hollow thud and walked away before the liquid reached his feet. Without a glance back, confident in his tree killing abilities, he marched away. The thought of the trees, which had occupied his mind for most of the day, receded with every step closer he got to the house. By the time he reached the back door, it was like they had never existed at all.

That night, he thought he'd finally get some sleep. James had been put to bed early and Dillon had finished his report, ready for the Board. He turned from facing outside the bed to Tiffany's, where she was still sat up, and the bedside light burned into his retinas.

'Can't sleep?' he mumbled into the pillow.

She was still, holding her breath, like she was petrified. 'I keep thinking I can hear something.'

Dillon rolled over. 'I can't hear anything.'

'Just listen. It's like a tearing sound.'

There was something; a ripping sound, like someone was pulling a duvet cover apart in slow, purposeful shreds. Then it stopped, just as suddenly as Dillon had heard it.

Tiffany was fixed on the bedroom window that overlooked the garden. She was still, hardly breathing, and Dillon knew she was trying to listen beyond the rustle of the sheets, of her own thudding heart.

'I can't stand this,' she whipped the covers back. 'I'm going to get that spade and chop that thing out of our garden.'

She faced the window, squinting, like she was impatiently waiting for her eyes to adjust against the glare of the bedside light.

'It's fine,' Dillon said. 'I'll do it tomorrow.'

‘You’ll dig it up?’

‘I’ll dig it up, throw it in the car and take it to someone who has a wood chipper. It’s fine. Come back to bed.’

‘It’s gone.’

The way she said it made Dillon pull the covers up over his shoulders. She didn’t turn to him, she barely moved.

The words choked up in his throat and he had to force them out. ‘What do you mean it’s gone?’

She didn’t answer and Dillon rushed over to the window. He opened it and stuck his head outside. The spot where he’d planted his mother’s ashes was easy to find. It was darker than all of the dark garden, as though the richest, most nutritious soil had been pulled from somewhere deep and forgotten. The turf had been pulled apart in great clumps.

‘Did the weed killer work?’ Tiffany’s voice quivered next to him.

Then a scraping sound filled the room. For a moment, Dillon couldn’t tell if it was coming from inside or outside the house. He shut the window.

A faint scratching sound was filtering up the stairs. Dillon could feel it on his back.

He didn’t know why, and certainly couldn’t understand how, but he knew that the thing that had been growing in the garden was at the back door.

Tiffany’s eyes had been forced wide with fear. Dillon watched as her lips squirmed.

A door creaked open and they both froze. Then James’s voice filled the corridor. ‘Grandma! Grandma’s here!’

Before either of them could react, his little feet pounded down the stairs in an awkward rhythm. And any fear, any reservations that Dillon might’ve had before, diminished.

He ran for the door, threw it open, and shouted, 'James stay away from the door!'

He was halfway down the stairs when he heard James say, with his most welcoming, innocent tone, 'Grandma.' Then the bolt shot back, the door opened and the house was filled with a sound Dillon could barely make sense of.

A wailing filled every space, every corner of every room. He could hear Tiffany choking up guttural sobs. The rest was James and his little voice that had become a primal scream.

JUSTIN SOLLY

The Estate

The man trudged through the derelict courtyard; looking up at the looming walls of monochrome concrete; matched by the chewing gum-stained floor, littered with the once smoking shells of cigarettes. Residents leaned over the prison bar balconies; sickly yellow light poured from the flats, shooting their shadows splashing around him like spectres. Clouds crawled behind the towering wall of flats, bloated with rain; hiding the moon which lurked half submerged amongst them. *I'm even seeing criminals in the clouds...* he thought, bitterly.

His partner came jogging up behind him. He briefly looked her over, taking in the platinum hair – bleached probably – artfully arranged under her shining oval hat, complete with a utility jacket that reeked of new polyethylene, with a Hi Vis vest draped over it. She was his latest barnacle from the precinct. Tara looked uneasy. He offered her a wry smile, pretending he didn't notice the fear swimming in her eyes.

'Sorry Sarge, I forgot to—'

'What the fuck do you want, bobby?'

He peered up at the balcony, trying to identify the source of the raised voice. Abuse was nothing new. A bald man with a well nurtured beer belly leered down at him, his paunch of fat resting on the slab of iron. Jared ignored him.

'You'll get used to it.'

Tara nodded, shrugging her luminescent yellow-green shoulders with apparent indifference. He knew better, and he knew that she knew he knew better. This was the game they would play, teacher and student. She couldn't wait to prove her worth. He couldn't

wait to be done with it all. *I can understand her ambition, I was young once – but she won't understand my lack of it, not for a few years at least. . . . If she makes it that far.*

'Stay close to me, I'll keep you safe.'

Jared tried not to bristle at her fragile nod in reply. He walked to the door, the glass smeared with dirt and unidentifiable stains. Next to the door, there was an equally neglected intercom.

He pulled the right side of his coat to his mouth. 'DS, NE403 arrived on scene. . . . Estate B, Westborough Grove – responding to a house call, over.'

The radio pinned to his jacket took a static breath and cackled back. 'Roger that. Proceed, over.'

'Let's hope this works, eh?' Jared said as he punched in the numbers of the call out and hit the buzzer. He glanced up at the balcony where the beer bellied man and his cronies loitered, brandishing bottles of cheap spirits and hurling obscenities – he couldn't make out the words, but he noticed their audience was growing.

'Should we be worried about them? Maybe we should call for back up? This place has a reputation. . . .' Tara said, tapping her forefinger against her baton compulsively.

Jared wondered if she realised she was doing it, eyeing the baton quizzically. Tara's gaze followed his own and the tapping ceased.

She smiled apologetically. 'I'm a fidget.'

Or just nervous, kid. He smiled. 'We all have our vices.' *Not that she needs to know about mine.* 'No, they like to make a racket but they're not stupid.'

Finally, the buzzer emitted a clicking noise of consent and the door opened. Abruptly, a bottle collided with the pavement smashing into a spray of glass, Tara jumped reflexively. Jared steadied her, fixing her with a level stare.

‘Don’t worry about me, Sarge.’ she said, resolutely.

The brief conversation that preceded her assignment to him flared in his memory. A degree level graduate. She was to be fast tracked, or so his CO had informed him in a tone that brooked no argument – he had argued anyway, for the sake of pride, had put on a spectacle for the desk jockeys staring through the slits of the blinds. The captain knew the drill, he played along, bandying words back and forth and gesticulating animatedly. The argument ended with the door shuddering in its hinges as Jared stormed from the office. The last words his CO said were to the effect of – ‘you’ve got to move on sometime,’ delivered gently – with a surgeon’s sensitivity.

Jared’s jaw tensed, as hard as concrete. ‘They’re all bark and no bite,’ he said, his lips cracking into a smirk. They climbed up the winding staircase, wrinkling their noses at the stale smell of piss. The flat was on one of the upper floors. The light mounted on the high ceiling blinked on and off. They reached the third floor and navigated their way cautiously through the corridor. A lone drop of water shot from the ceiling, ricocheting off his hat. The concrete walls were a darker, sourer kind of grey – almost black. He scanned the door numbers as he passed them, stopping at the one that read ‘473’. He offered Tara a reassuring smile and knocked with authority.

‘Police! We are responding to a call out.’

Nothing. He hammered on the door again, until the muffled reverberation of his fists faded into a lingering silence.

‘Keep an eye on the stairwell,’ he said.

He leant into his radio again. ‘DS, NE403 and PO, NE008 on the scene, no response. I’m going to try the neighbours, over.’

Jared approached the opposite door, where sounds of habitation came from inside, accompanied by the low thump of music. He

pounded on the door, once, twice. There was a delay – then a young woman draped in a bath robe pulled the door open an inch, the tip of a nose peeped through, her eyes shadowed behind the door.

‘Yeah?’

‘I’m responding to a call out for flat 473... Have you seen the resident... A Mrs Daylen... recently?’

The woman’s tone shifted. ‘Mrs Daylen... No.’ The woman closed the door, behind it there came the rattling sound of a chain being lifted off the hook. The door opened, she came out and pulled the door ajar behind her. A baby bawled from inside; the woman appeared not to notice. She fiddled with her robe, cinching it tight at the waist and staring almost apologetically at her slippers.

‘She’s a sweet woman, I used to run over once or twice a week and help her with some meals, chores and stuff, but she hasn’t been responding – I reported it... I’m worried she might have... There’s a fucking awful smell coming from in there.’

At the mention of the smell, it assailed his nostrils as if it had been lurking, waiting to be acknowledged before it unveiled itself – *what was that? It smells like rot.* Jared glanced at Tara, her face had a yellow tinge to it, similar to her florescent HiVis. He nodded in response.

‘Do you have a key?’

The woman shook her head.

‘Okay, go back inside. Thank you for your time.’

The woman’s eyes darted up the hallway. ‘No worries, man. She’s a sweet lady. Too sweet for this shit hole, nobody ever visited her neither, ‘cept me. Also, she has a cat...’

Jared caught the worried inflection; he nodded absently as if he hadn’t. Policing was a game of masks, of storing away titbits of information of seeming irrelevance, taking note of every minute

detail without giving away the impression that you noticed anything. They tried the door again.

'Mrs Daylen! Open up! It's the police, we are here to check if you're alright! Can you hear me? Hello!'

They waited. Nothing. He nodded to Tara; she graciously stepped out of the way. He took a step back, bounced on his knees and kicked the door, aiming for the lock. The door bulged on its hinges. He kicked again, it buckled. On the third attempt, the door shattered open like a wooden piñata in a shower of splinters. Immediately Jared's arm flew to his mouth, his eyes watering from the sudden exposure. The repugnant smell stuck to his tongue. It reminded him of when his father had forced him to smoke a whole pack of Bensons, when he had been caught with a cigarette hanging from his mouth. Nothing could erase the cloying ashen taste of that memory, it lingered on for years. He could still taste it when he brushed his teeth, when he remembered to, anyway.

'Jesus fucking Christ!' said Tara, her voice muffled into her elbow.

Jared clamped a hand on her shoulder, smiling outwardly whilst inwardly a sense of foreboding bubbled. He grappled momentarily with the sensation: a familiar spasm of irrational fear and a sudden urge to flee. He sucked in a calming breath and raised a finger to his lips. Tara nodded quickly. Jared unglued his boot from the floor with a conscious effort, taking his first step, doggedly edging through the doorway. Tara clung to his shadow. The place was filthy. Cat litter spilled across the floor like dirty marbles. The faded chequered lino was sticky with dried lumps of cat shit, dirty clothes, and an overspill of rubbish. As they moved further inwards, it became clear the stench was coming from the living room. A veil of beaded curtains partitioned off the living room from the kitchen. The kitchen side groaned under the weight of a pile of

plates, mouldy food, and an empty bottle of Smirnoff. The beads tinkled as Jared pushed through them. Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He flicked his flashlight on – and his blood frosted in his veins. His jaw plummeted. He held out a cautionary hand to his partner – too late – he turned to her, his flashlight illuminating her contorted face – and then she screamed.

The shrill, high-pitched scream did nothing to unnerve the cat. A mangy tabby with moth eaten fur sat hunched upon Miss Daylen's chest, its gingerbread tail flicked lazily from side to side, as it regarded them with wide, lantern eyes – a shocking Chernobyl-green, with yellowing bloodshot irises and pupils as tenebrous as black holes. A strip of rotten flesh hung from the open maw of the cat; one horrified look was enough to tell where it had come from. Miss Daylen's face looked like a butcher's work, half skeletal, half skinless red. Tara doubled over, spewing vomit onto the floor. Jared gagged violently as he struggled to keep his own disgust down, vomit pooled acridly in his throat. He pulled his radio to his dry lips. The words stuck in his throat; he swallowed down the bile. His heart jackhammered in his chest.

Then he heard it. A low, wheezing groan. He span, quivering with a fresh wave of nausea, the frost in his veins turning to ice.

Jared unclogged his throat, drawing in a steadying breath. 'Holy fuck, she's alive!'

He pulled his radio to his lips urgently. 'DS, NE403, over! I. I need an ambulance, at 473... 473 Westborough Grove, Estate B. I repeat I need an ambulance... urgent medical attention required, over!'

'Roger that, DS. Ambulance inbound.'

A low howling sound snatched his attention. He turned slowly. The cat had vanished. He tried vainly to calm his breathing as

he flicked his flashlight around the room, checking the corners. Suddenly, torchlight reflected off lanterns of green. He jumped back as the cat hissed. He refocused his trembling hands; the light from his torch wavered against the wall – it was gone. Tara screamed.

Tara and the deranged cat wrestled on the floor like a satirical cartoon, rolling over and over. The rookie's face was a criss-crossed ribbon of bloody claw marks. Jared stared dumbly, petrified with shock. The creature snaked forwards; its fangs punctured Tara's bottom lip and tore, the skin of her bottom lip stretched elastically like red mozzarella, splattering him with blood. Adrenaline boiled his icy veins, melting his fear. He surged into action, lashing out with his baton. The creature hissed and sprung back – fiendishly fast. It coiled on its hind legs, and sprung forwards, lunging at his face. Jared ducked, and the creature clattered against the wall, yowling with fury. His flashlight chased it as it scurried up the wall, then he lost his footing and collided with the floor heavily, the flashlight slipped from his sweaty palm as he fell. Jared lay on his back panting. Above him, two green lanterns stared down at him. A cat like purr permeated the air with more than sound – with maleficent glee. *Fuck this.* Jared scrambled to his feet, dashing for Tara. She lay nearby in a crumpled heap, her face a virgin's nightmare of tears and blood. He hauled her limp body over a shoulder and sprinted out the door. There was a chaotic commotion from inside the flat. He jumped back instinctively, pressing Tara's body against the wall behind him – just as the thing vaulted out of the door and halfway up the hallway, its shadow merging with the darkness. The creature paused at the stairwell, regarding him with one last look of cold, dispassionate contemplation – visible only by its unnaturally green, lantern eyes. Then it vanished.

GEORGE THOMPSON

Periodicity with Decay

fffT!

A blue light in my mind becomes red with the sound of fumbling at a switch and a ringing of electric currents. I fear something doesn't want me to discuss a certain idea. My fingers tremble as I begin to write, as this is the third or fourth time that I have attempted to put this idea to a page. I keep getting distracted from the idea and it's making me believe that perhaps the idea is sentient and draws my attention away whenever it gets the chance to exist. The first time, I was in a café with my girlfriend. That may have been the second time, I'm not too sure.

A busy street, a proper street with people, bikes, buses, and cars all appearing to collide with each other as you watch from your vantage point: an outdoor seat of a quiet, rustic café. This café sits opposite a large church or temple: one that makes you question the tools and building practices possible at the time it was built. Take Christ the Redeemer, for example – and no, that's not where this story takes place – surely the builders had to keep taking long walks back from it to check everything was in check. I stop and read through my writing every few sentences. When I'm drawing, I always try to get a bit of distance (physical distance) from what I've drawn to check that the thousands of dots I've stippled have formed a nice fluid shape, in the way I've intended. How could you step back from Christ the Redeemer? I guess you've just got to have faith.

The sky darkens. You have become rather fatigued of your work and have drifted off into a daze of people-watching.

It's possible this idea isn't that original, akin to when writers write about a genius writer character. Or the weird pattern where in Woody Allen films, a man always ends up cheating on his partner. I think about that often; originality, not cheating. I don't think about that at all. Originality. When I think about originality, my mind moves into the topic of artificial intelligence. If you give an AI all the text that humans have ever recorded and tell it to keep creating text, surely – *surely* – the artificial intelligence will draw upon other AI generated text. The idea of a house goes from one artist's interpretation of a house to another, and if AI continues to interpret the house, it surely – *surely* – must end up with its platonic form. As text, a house will gradually decay from a 'vast ruined castle' to just a 'house'. All people become the singular, asexual 'human' until the AI can define life by a single word.

No, no, I had an idea I was trying to put to the page. Instead, I was describing myself becoming distracted. In fact, my girlfriend has been banished to the floor to do some yoga, so I can finally write this idea down. It might be the first original idea I've had; I don't know.

I wish I didn't get distracted so easily so I could write this idea down. I used to, as a child, be free to roam my classroom with my work as I was incapable of sitting still. Just as you are sat still in this café.

Pardon me.

You're growing tired of your work, and you need entertainment of some kind, and as you're of a lonely disposition, you look to the world. You watch this temple and the sun setting behind it, leaving the square between you and the temple to its own devices, without the sun. Just as you believe it to be too dark for the safe

passage of the hundreds passing back and forth in this vast plain, you hear what sounds like someone trying to put a plug into a socket they cannot see: the rubbing of metal against plastic until the satisfying ‘clop’. Following this, remember you’re still looking at the busy square, you hear a ‘fffT’ as the plastic switch is clicked into ‘on’ and simultaneously the streetlights of the square, nay, the whole city turn on. There’s a new buzzing to accompany this light, coming from that same abstract direction that the previous noises had come from.

Let me come back to this tomorrow. Sorry. I don’t know what’s happened. Last summer, I wrote thousands of words every day and I exhausted any originality I had. I felt like I was carving all of my ideas into stone to be written once and only once, forever. If I didn’t do them justice: bad luck. I draw with a pen when I stipple so everything is immediately permanent, but in the grand scheme of the drawing, a single dot out of place isn’t a make-or-break situation. A story where the writer keeps interrupting is annoying though so I must apologise. I wish I could write as confidently as Ernest Hemingway in *The Torrents of Spring*. Every so often in that book, he interjects to say, ‘Hi, I hope you’re enjoying this. I’m going to take a break from writing it but it’s really rather good, don’t you think?’ Instead of that, I’m struggling to write this idea. This sentient idea that tells my girlfriend to look up at me and begin a conversation whenever it forms in my mind.

This idea, I think, exists within the idea itself. I know that sounds overly complicated but allow me to explain. It’ll all make sense eventually.

Café, tired, lights turning on, and a buzz.

In case you were wondering, I do exist in the world I'm putting you in. I'm not exempt from whatever consequences this world faces, I would rather you didn't worry that I was sending you alone into a café across a street and a square full of fast-paced tourists and buses and bikes and taxis, from a temple.

Your attempt to people-watch is foiled by quite how fast everyone is moving, and your eyelids are growing temptingly heavy. Your tired eyes fix on a single, stationary person, much easier to see.

The pitch of that buzzing of the lights shoots up.

This person is stood at the foot of the temple, which is between fifty and a hundred metres away. That is a minute and a half of walking or nine seconds of world-record sprinting. You imagine them sprinting at you for ten seconds and the way in which they would run if they had to match that speed. There are no distinguishable facial features at this distance, only a red and yellow fleece, jeans and shoulder-length black hair. They were facing away originally, and they still are, but once you fix your gaze upon them, and the pitch of that buzzing shoots up, they begin to move, vibrating on the spot.

A short car horn beeps in the distance setting off a chain reaction of slower, differently pitched horns of likely angrier drivers.

A car beeped at me the other day. I was cycling in the middle of the road, ready to indicate to turn right as I'd only just left the lights. A car beeped its horn at me, and a lady shouted out the window, 'Cycle in the bus lane!', so I raised my middle finger at her as I indicated right and a part of me hoped she felt really silly but there's no real way of knowing. I think the idea I'm writing for you now was beginning to form as I was peacefully pedalling in the middle of the road and that sentient idea put itself in this

lady's mind – this silly person who drives an SUV in a city – and made her make me forget. So, I forgot.

I believe it's here now, in the room with me. I'm getting a little bit tired now, so I'm going to write more of this at a later date.

Every object moving about the square looks as though it's moving away from the person stood shaking. You're still fixed tight on this person moving side-to-side and up-and-down on the spot, not tethered to any object in reality. You're inclined to believe this person isn't aware of this predicament they're in, or perhaps they aren't a person at all. To you, now, they are a person quite a way away acting in a manner too odd to ignore, yet nobody else seems to be noticing them. Everybody is either choosing to ignore the figure by the temple, or the figure by the temple has chosen you. Your tired mind awakens a little more to study this abstract potential threat. You widen your eyes and blink hard a few times to get the eyes going, revving up your brain. When you press your eyelids tight together the buzzing grows louder for a moment, then dims back to normal.

A bus passes through the square and blocks the figure from view. Defiant determination gripping you, you find your gaze unbroken from the exact spot it would have been in, until the bus finally moves out of the way. Just as they come back into view—

fffT!

A flick of a switch and you're suddenly alone. Hundreds of tourists and disappear along with the thick soup of noise they had filled the square with.

Silence.

This breaks your trance.

You stand.

Today is a new day and I can only apologise for what you've been reading. It was all part of the original idea that I've been mentioning. I mentioned before about my bike? Yes, well I got thrown off of it yesterday. I'm okay, I just bent my front wheel and there's a lot of paint scratched off the front fork. A large, blue SUV pulled out of a junction and into the left-most lane available to them: the bike lane. They pulled out of a junction in their vehicle with a blind-spot the length of thirteen children and into the bright-blue painted, raised bike lane. They may as well have pulled onto the pavement and continued to drive. They hit, with their abnormally large vehicle, my road bike and I was thrown left, knocked my head on the pavement and scuffed my elbow and knee. Moments later, a lady, with shoulder-length black hair, lifted me to my feet and I quickly dusted myself off and began to walk my bike home. She apologised profusely, then told me I wasn't actually hurt at all since I had stood up and was walking, but my leg and back really ached and still do as I write this. If I had had more confidence, I would have asked for her details and taken her to small claims court for the damages. As she drove off, my heart began to thump hard in my chest and a cloud of dread loomed over me. A front wheel isn't as bad as a back wheel, I told myself, the tire and fork are okay.

Why am I telling you this? Well, when I got home, I sanded, resprayed, and varnished the scratched fork. I did this all in my room with closed windows before proceeding to write about everybody disappearing. It's possible that the solvents in the air are what caused such an odd vision of a story, despite that story having existed in my mind for weeks before writing it down on the page. It's hard to explain. Perhaps the solvents only enhanced the odd style. If so, for that I must apologise.

The lady in the red and yellow fleece looks a little like you in your dream that night. You're all snug and cuddled up, legs wrapped around a spare pillow, and your tired eyes are so happy to finally be closed. There she is. She's standing in an empty, black space. There are white dots penetrating the infinite blackness that could be stars or imperfections in film. She's still a little too far to see clearly, but she's facing you now, examining you with her eyes that dart about in her skull, looking you up and down. She's older than you, by about twenty to thirty years, and it's really beginning to show in the roots of her shoulder-length hair and the creases under her eyes. You're still not sure about her or her motives. In the dream, you've both been examining each other for an endless amount of time.

fffT!

An eye opens in the empty space. A red and yellow iris with a cat's pupil stares warmly at you as more and more eyes pierce the black space around the lady in the red and yellow fleece.

Each eye holds a different gaze. Some gazes are empty, like runway models. Others aren't looking at you at all. A few are wide-eyed and maniacal, not posing a specific threat but overly eager to observe you. The stares emit the same humming electrical frequency you heard in the café. There are blotches of wisdom spotted about with a few appearing older despite the absence of flesh, eyelids, and skin; only the eyes themselves hover in the space. In fact, there's no discernible distance between you and the eyes. They are in an abstract 'background-space', as though all that you are seeing is two-dimensional. It is a dream, after all.

I often have precognitive dreams. I'm not necessarily suggesting that the cat's eyes in space are foreshadowing a coming event in this story of mine. I'm not trying to suggest anything

specific- spe ci fic- specific. Sorry. You're probably piecing something together about what I'm saying in my idea. Maybe the cat's eyes will come back. Who am I to say?

I often have precognitive dreams. The night before my accident, I dreamt I was driving a sports car in a desert and a giant hand reached out and pushed my car over because I'd upset the sand.

Growing up in a terraced house with thin walls, I heard the noise a lot. Every night, my neighbour would switch off – presumably – their bedside light and the sound would echo through my brain. Anytime a big event would happen in the house, the night before I'd have heard the click louder than before – my grandmother dying, my parent's divorce, the night before any important exams at school. I felt sometimes that they knew exactly when things like that would happen and would launch themselves at their switch with the intention of making me hear it, switching my life from one course to the next.

fffT! and all the colours and sounds and temperature and texture would all suddenly swap. Life felt colder for a month; things tasted different. I was unhappy.

The last time I heard the flick of that switch myself was the night I realised I wanted to become a writer. Now I'm writing about that night. Weird. Part of me now wonders if I had never moved out, would the switch have made me anything else? Is that the reason everything has slowed down in my life? I haven't had a new phase in years.

I'm sorry about all this. All writing is personal, of course, but I fear this may have become a little too personal. I was supposed to be telling you this idea I had for a story, but then I keep getting distracted.

So, café on a busy square, electrical noises, your mother stands under a temple with shoulder-length black hair and a red and yellow fleece on, shaking. You've then dreamt of her. A load of eyes have appeared in space.

It's the following day, you're back at the square but this time you've decided to choose a different café. There's plenty of choice, after all. You're sat as you were, though, facing the crowds that rush through each other. The scent of old wood and truffle oil wafting through the air, the change in scenery and the different music choice in this new café inspires you to put some ideas and feelings you've felt down into something visual.

You bring out a laptop and begin collecting images of yourself in good and bad memories. You throw in some paintings: Regnault's Salome and Magritte's Golconda thrown next to photos of you and family members you only see at weddings and funerals. As you piece together your images, you have this inkling to put an eye in the mood-board you're drawing up. That works, you think, in an odd sort of way. You add another, then another, until your mood-board is just a board of eyes all staring in different ways. You look up from your screen at the people all moving past your vision and note their eyes. Some are empty, some are wide-eyed and maniacal, with blotches of wisdom in the faces of some of the passers-by. This all goes in the vision board.

'This is good!' you whisper excitedly to yourself, before pulling out your sketchbook from your bag.

You click your mechanical pencil, and the buzzing noise rings in your mind again, like electricity. With a compass you draw a perfect circle. You stare at this circle trying to figure out where to go next... It stares back at you... You scribble an iris roughly in

the centre of this circle and you see it. A simulacrum of all the eyes in one eye.



You look up again.

Everyone in the square is staring at you.

fffT! The red light turns blue: you're on.

The stage lights go up and you're there presenting your idea to everybody. All the faces you saw in the square are sat as audience members, watching intently.

'Good evening, everyo...' – your voice breaks – 'everyone. Sorry.'

The audience is silent, anticipating something extraordinary. This is your big break. You say your name and introduce your idea.

'This here,' a keynote shows the eye you drew, 'is a little something I call: *Simulacrum of All the Eyes*. It's a piece about, well... It's inspired by my late mother, and I guess, the idea of everyone's mother.'

A hand raises in the studio audience.

'I wasn't expecting questions, but sure,' you say.

A spotlight shines down from somewhere unknown.

The sleeve of a red and yellow fleece.

'What does it really mean?' she says with a low, broken voice.

You shrug.

'I think the eye looks cool. It's like a thing within a thing. I keep seeing my mother in places and I'm struggling to remember certain details about her. This art is about how I remember her eyes, as my memories just become memories of memories and eventually, all

I'll remember her by is her favourite jumper; the idea of a mother she may have been. I've been trying to get down more, but things keep getting in the way, overwriting the parts of my mind with important memories in them and I can feel the old me disappear as my disks rewrite.

You receive a roar of applause and a standing ovation. A few more audience members share their experience with you and a number are in tears, giving testament that they've experienced similar things as they've grown older.

The idea has let me finish now. She's wearing her red and yellow fleece and has her hand on my shoulder rather than covering my eyes this time. She's no longer telling people to distract me, or cars to hit me, or anything to happen that could divert me and I'm free to wrap up.

I hope you got something important out of this. Not to sound too earnest.

All the sounds of electricity that whirred, the lights and chaos in my mind all ceases. The red light becomes a soft blue.

fffT!

NORA VESELAJ

The Promise's Vice

'I can save her.'

It was such an easy thing to say. It was bound to slip out, one way or another. The promise that Alcaide could save someone.

The Hatchetts' only child was dying. Slowly, but dying regardless. The Doctor of Naturopathic Medicine was all they had left, after regular doctors had failed them.

They hadn't said that they had failed when they came to her dingy shopfront, but Alcaide knew anyway. Their modern magic, New Age restoration spells, were poisoning the girl even more, giving false hope.

Those doctors were good for nothing, warding off her sickness for a week and giving one more shot to make happy memories, before she was inevitably readmitted to the hospitals, worse off than before.

Alcaide was only happy her vitriol was masked by the plague doctor garb that covered her face, with round, curious circles for eyes only facing Mr and Mrs Hatchett's own. And with that same face, she made the promise – while the little girl, Emily, touched her beak with those same wide eyes, dropping the icing–sugar-dusted apple turnover from her little hands.

Mrs Hatchett clutched the rainbow-tinted flowers to her chest, bursting into small giggles as though she hadn't heard such a thing before, a passionate promise to do whatever was possible to save their little bundle of joy. Mr Hatchett remained stoic; arms crossed to his chest with no flowers in his fists. Alcaide even noticed him coaxing Emily back to their side after his wife shook his arm.

‘Nothing’s gonna come of this, Amelia. Come on, Emily – come on, don’t touch that. We’ll get you some lunch, and then we’ll get out of here. If an herbalist is all they have for a doctor—’

‘How many more lunches does Emily have left? How many – if we don’t even try with her? I’m so sorry, Miss – I – we’re willing to give you a try.’

‘Now, Amelia—’

It was enough for her to speak without any thought. Just to stop a brewing argument brimming on their tongues that the child would be forced to cover her ears for.

‘I promise you now, I’ll have something done by tomorrow morning.’

The promise came from a less comforting mask, even though her own face quivered behind it. Years of never promising anything had built up, swelled up, leaving her emotionally defenceless against their pleas for help.

They were silenced by the declaration – bolder than a half-arsed commitment from a hesitant doctor. They held Emily closer to them, something renewing, budding even beneath the scepticism. A sudden shift, better than the alternative of giving up.

Retracting her word and becoming the doctors they turned from before would only make her more guilty, with more blood dripping from formerly white gloves. Taking it all back would make the wounds they suffered to get here worthless.

Only her empty helping hand was left to hold them up.

Now, she was left heaving over her lab, darting from herb to root to flower to syrup, the naturopathic knowledge she dedicated her life to fading away. ‘The Canis root or – the chamomile – no, that’s not for something like this... This is—’

Even the recipe books she flicked through for hours thereafter

were filled with nothing – blank pages where the *masters* failed to put cures into words.

Alcaide finally glance over her file again, torn up from being tossed around in a suitcase for a few days at the very least.

Chronic, not yet terminal, *with the potential to be*.

And the point of no return, she felt, drew nearer and nearer. She'd promised miracles for tomorrow morning, only armed with a hazy, fogged mind.

Weary, she covered it with a bottle and looked back to the sea of alchemy ingredients before her. When they were last categorised was beyond her knowledge, but *time was of the essence* regardless of whether she was ready to take on the challenge. The phrase replayed in her mind, hours slipping by with nothing to show for her desperate declaration.

Shelves were stacked with mismatched colours, recently strained plants staining the edges from forgetting to be used, boiling equipment was far out of the way, almost banished to the depths of rustic cupboards, tossed in after a mild cleaning.

She could live here 24/7, and nothing would change. The mess would only persist until that girl was dead, and Alcaide had to retract her promise by force – as the disappointed eyes of the Hatchedts gazed on her unfeeling mask.

She could cry as much as she wanted behind that thing, but at the end of it, she would have to cover up and apologise, just like any other regular doctor who'd messed up, before moving on.

The Doctor of Naturopathic Alchemy had a low bar to hit to be considered good, however, seeing as she was one of the only doctors with that title left in the world. Plagues tended to be her specialty, but this case was far beyond the necrosis she was used to poking with her cane.

Musty air was sucked into lungs, disrupting the energy in the unlit room. Fresh air, perhaps, she concluded, was a passable remedy for cultivating catastrophes faster than cultivating medicine. Fresh air was also the best way to find fresh ingredients that didn't distil their hues onto the shelf drawers.

The autumn lanterns hanging just outside doors were on as she left, heels clacking on the cobblestone street. She had long stopped caring about them getting wedged in between the cracks, remembering the route down to the steps she took towards the Andancia forest from the village.

Storefronts were still bustling with tourists while the sun careened downward in the sky, casting a golden glow over fresh baked goods sold by a vendor she didn't see the friendly face of; a local miner's assistant showing off moonstone and amber ore veins that glinted even past their price tags; amber and tiger's eye jewellery she had had her eye on for weeks (or months), and fresh fruits, organised in a way that made Alcaide envious of her own setup.

She was going to carry on, alone, with no baked goods or jewels to make her happy while that girl suffered, until one of the vendors – the florist, just shoved more to the side of the marketplace – hollered to her, a buzzing expression beneath her pastel-blond hair.

'Alcaide! Alcaide, hang on, over here!'

Alcaide pointed to herself, lifting her head away from the soaked autumn leaves stuck to the floor.

'Yeah, you! It's been forever, come over for a sec!'

'I have no seconds to spare, Maider. I must get to the forest, there's something that's missing from this recipe...'

The excuse would be futile, seeing as Maider Mesonero would leave her stall vulnerable to thieves if it meant she could drag an

old friend over for a talk. So, Isabel stopped in her tracks, like a magic barrier had been placed before her, and hurried towards the florist with wheat between her lips, letting her tip her straw hat before she started again in protest.

‘Maider, please. Time is of the essence, for this patient, unless you have something that can stop this condition before it becomes terminal—’

‘Aren’t you gonna do it?’

‘Eh?’

‘Aren’t you gonna tip your hat?’

The blond puffed her cheeks out and brightened her eyes beneath what was left of the autumn sun, preventing Alcaide from going on an angry tirade about how, again, *time was of the essence*, until that turn of phrase lost all meaning. So, she did, tipping her characteristic plague doctor’s hat, muttering something about getting this over with faster.

‘Excellent.’ She clapped her hands together and postulated them, leaning over her counter. Slow. ‘Now what’s all this about a new patient? Maybe if you tell me some stuff, I can see if I have something for them. And then maybe we can go for a drink when you’re done with the cure, or whatever...?’ Maider’s pitch raised until she sighed in defeat, as a look from the mask was all she needed to know. ‘No? Alright, alright.’

Alcaide placed a hand over her head and repeated the story from the case file verbatim, placing her as the last hope for the family at the very end of it, a hand placed against her frilly shirt for emphasis before she played with the dusty yellow bow binding her short over-cloak, given by Maider on a charity hunt... Their last one. Years ago.

‘The doctors from the big cities – they said the last one they

went to was Mutebourne – couldn't do anything. Even with all the fancy magic at their disposal. And now they want me to find a cure for their girl.'

'And you promised.'

'And I promised.'

'A foolish mistake.'

'I'm aware,' Alcaide replied in a monotone mutter. 'In any case, that's what I did, and I was in my lab, but everything was in such a state, I couldn't tell my thyme from my coriander and my selkie ashes from the dried bindweed – it was a mess.' She finished her tale of woe, while Maider placed a finger to her own lips and dug around in her own mess of flowers, organised only by colour and *'how pretty they were'*.

'You know, I think I know about the family you're talking about. I mean – I do know. The Hatchetts. They were all around the city this morning, looking for a – doctor with a mask. Sound familiar?'

Maider picked up Olcentorns and crystallised Sichrary flowers from her bundles, tossing them to the side until Alcaide saved them, placing them back on top of her stall. A thorn caught her wrist in her haste, and she pulled at it.

'Ay, I remember – hey, they had a bouquet of these this morning! The Olcentorn flowers, they had them in their arms, did they come from you?'

'Yeah. Yeah, they did. Little freebie from me because the kid loved 'em. I must've held them up for some time, talking about you. Sorry, might've boosted their expectations – but – you remember what you did for my little cousin last year, right? You were quite the miracle worker to me, at least. You dragged me all around town trying to find someone who sold this healing rune to finish your recipe, and I didn't even think it was gonna go anywhere...'

‘You tell the family that little script this morning?’ Alcaide questioned, leaning against the stall to stare at the dwindling market, the scent of bloomed bread, honey nut treats and apple turnovers wafting in the air toward them. Nothing new, but something ignored. Maider laughed and patted her shoulder, swearing on her life and the divines above that she would never do such a thing.

Alcaide raised an eyebrow behind her mask. Unseen, but sensed.

‘Well, I might have changed a few words. Point is, you’re fretting like a little mouse over nothing. You’re a miracle worker ‘round here and you know it. Just trust yourself,’ Maider attempted to conclude, digging in her stall more until she came across what she was looking for, with more thorns stuck in her hands than spines on a hedgehog. ‘And... you’ll be even more of a miracle worker when you use these Dryad ashes. Thank God for forest fires, eh?’ Maider grinned, holding up a jar.

‘Please don’t tell me you actually went to the site of a forest fire.’

‘No.’

Mock concern floated in her voice, pouting with the same innocence. That golden hour behind her, however, did not do her innocence any favours.

‘Alright, my brother did. But he didn’t want it. Said they only had healing and growing properties. Good for a gardener like me. And good for a doctor like you.’

She forced the jar into Alcaide’s hands, causing her to flush deep red behind the mask. That, like her raised eyebrow, didn’t go unnoticed.

‘Maider... I... Don’t know what to say. How much do you want for this, this is amazing, I haven’t seen the ashes of these creatures – ever – when dryads die, they have these very personal rituals, no outsiders allowed – I—’

‘Fix the girl up and take me out for a drink and something sweet tomorrow. Or you can pay 19000 gold now and live in misery.’

The straw between her lips switched ends, and she chuckled, tipping her hat again with a thorny hand.

‘Oh, and you’ll probably have to fix my hand up, too.’

Alcaide agreed, nodding her head and tipping her hat once more before turning to face the resting market behind her, a brighter illumination casting a glow over the faces she ignored before. Golden hearts lingered behind the counters of open stalls in case someone came at the last minute to find their wares or have something to eat, and lamps outside the local inns and bars and bookstores never flickered on her way back to her own place. Alcaide glanced at every place on the way back and took her time beneath the stone arches and bridges, monuments to the village she used to sit underneath during her days of rest.

She pretended to hold a book close to her chest, like she was a student again, studying beneath the trees and the lamps beneath the bridges, recognising the joy in venturing into the unknown with no hesitations holding her back.

Just a desire to learn all she could about naturopathy, as niche as it was.

Those days, she recognised, were long gone now, replaced with schools of magic restoration and healing in the more developed cities.

But letting that stop her from carrying out her own work where the masters failed was even more of a failure than they could ever hope for.

Not that hoping for failure is something that one does, usually.

The promise still lingered on her tongue, and she cursed that certainty in her mind, but what was done was done, and the night was still young.



The stars, she found, aligned through her window when she got home, casting their luminescence over shelves lined with books and dust that contaminated her gloves when she ran a finger over the old oak finishing.

And moonlight, when it found Alcaide, became her brief guide, tracing a line to the equipment and ingredients she shunned and tossed away.

Foliage lit up on her windowsill, light bouncing off the leaves in a dim reflection towards the table, Alcaide following it with full hands, where she decided to find the right path on her own when the moon shifted away.

Alcaide replaced the light with lamps and rid herself of her cloak, letting herself succumb to the work ethic of the night she'd forgotten. Automatic movements darted toward the Chelmutus plants and Eoplelda flowers – for breathing support and consistent health supplementals, cinnamon for easier tasting, the Dryad ashes for growing and replenishment, Thrite roots for strength and strong bones (that second one was a rumour, but it sold well anyway), and the Sentinel Rose for her little, overworked heart.

Everything she grasped for, she got without fuss, without the drama of the morning. Everything she dried, wrung and mixed over the fire never overheated or wilted.

The recipe pages from master alchemists matched the initial emptiness of the pages in her study books but soon were filled at the crack of dawn with measurements and pen splatter doodles of all the ingredients facing every angle on the tea-stained page. A mysterious code to all but her, who stared with the same curious mask-eyes at the concoction that brewed over the last shreds of moonlight and copied its form inside her book down to the bottle she stored it in (tinted blue glass).

Each little scratch of the pen brought her back to other hurried nights turned days of scribbling new recipes and concoctions, spilling drinks down her pages and tearing outdated pages out, until a knock on her storefront snapped her to attention.

Alcaide wasted no time. She picked up the bottle with her stained and torn gloved hands. Her mask slipped, and her eyes began to water, as the fumes crept inside. Fumbling with the bottle, she quickly readjusted it, and raced to the door.

Sure enough, they had returned, their own hearts restless from a lack of sleep, fretting over their child whenever she so much as blinked the whole night.

Amelia Hatchett tapped her foot against the floor, mouth quivering as she stayed close to her husband, who wasn't a good source of physical support. Their fidgeting and anticipation ceased, however, when Alcaide stopped glaring from the morning light and handed them the bottle, a yellow ribbon like her own wound around it.

The smile behind the mask went unnoticed when they asked with sheepish voices how much she wanted for her work, petting Emily's head when she tried to reach for the bottle, sparkles reflected in doe-like eyes.

Alcaide shook her head and adjusted the straps of her mask to take it off fully, revealing what was beneath to relieve them of their stresses.

Amber eyes glowed in the morning light, reflections in her irises almost bleeding liquid gold as they widened, with her crooked smile reassuring them that the mask was a mere farce for cheer and delight. Rigid confidence and stoicism fled her, as her throat cleared and she spoke, almost trembling.

'Not a thing, okay? Just make her – Emily, I mean, as happy as you can for now, and that will surely be enough.'

KAVIL WAGH

A Space Lore

Amidst the silent expanse of the cosmos, the sleek, pointed vessel tore through the veils of the inky unknown.

The name tag on his chest read 'Aakash'. Aakash entered the coordinates to his destination, the quantum computer flashed numbers on-screen quickly performing complex calculations. When it completed its calculations, it stopped and locked into one number line. The console asked him to 'confirm destination?' and Aakash punched the green button. The computer figured out a wormhole equation and used the torpedo gun sitting under the ship to shoot a beam creating a wormhole. The ship zoomed into the wormhole and in an instant landed on the other side of the portal above the planet Arion.

Aakash was descending onto the planet to deliver a shipment of fuel crystals to the authorities. He located the base: a square shaped building divided into four quadrants. The building was situated on a mountain plateau. Each quadrant of the building was a courtyard with a string course of ornamented columns. He landed in quadrant one and climbed out of the spaceship. Commodore Singh was awaiting him. Corporal Aakash climbed out of the ship and greeted him, 'Long live Indira.'

'Good job on making fast work of the journey. Now, take these boxes back to base on Earth,' said Commodore Singh.

'What's in the boxes, Commodore?'

Commodore Singh looked at him and said, 'Fuel cells. Faulty ones. They're required back home for testing.'

'Okay sir, permission to leave?' asked Aakash, his eyes locked beyond Commodore Singh to where a man in a hooded cloak was

quickly approaching. He marched straight past them, towards the ship.

‘Permission granted.’

Aakash saluted the Commodore, before picking up the crates of faulty fuel cells, and turned to his ship. The man in the cloak retreated from the ship, his hood pulled down so far down that he couldn’t see Aakash coming. He bumped into him.

‘Watch out,’ Aakash called after the hooded figure, as he stopped and stared at him.

The hunched figure looked at him with dark eyes and green coloured skin, his face covered with a mask. The figure did what resembled an apologetic bow and started to back away. Aakash maintained eye contact but broke it since he was in a hurry. He trudged towards his spaceship and placed the crate in the cockpit. Entering his ship, he engaged all flight controls, and lifted off out of the atmosphere.

Up out of the Arion’s orbit, Aakash waved his hands sideways and jerked his head as the music played. He recited some lyrics as he entered the coordinates back to Earth. The quantum computer calculated the wormhole equation and processed the information. The torpedo fired and a wormhole appeared, filling the space in front of the ship. The system asked, ‘confirm location?’ Aakash accepted the request, and the ship sprinted into the wormhole. The ship accelerated to the speed of light; it looked like the stars were trailing away from the ship. It made the wormhole look like a white tunnel. The red emergency light flickered, and the music stopped. An alarm blazed through the speaker. Startled, Aakash looked around in panic.

‘All systems down, scrambler detected.’

‘What – how?’ said Aakash.

The ship had trailed off to another exit point. Aakash tried to send an SOS back home, but the jammed systems wouldn’t let him. The engine burst and all computers went offline. He pressed a button on his shoulder and a helmet folded out and over his head. The ship’s flaps opened to slow down its descent into the darkness. Something powerful was pulling at the ship. All he could see was a bright circular ring around a giant black ball of death. It was a spinning black hole. He thought to himself, ‘This is it.’ He held on to a locket that hung from his neck. The picture of his mother, himself as a boy, his home.

In the moment of total despair something clicked. He remembered Einstein’s theory for spinning black holes. Aakash thought, ‘I must go near the speed of light to traverse past the black hole. It is either that or I will be spaghettified – each cell of my body stretched like a single string. It might be thinner than spaghetti, though.’

He activated the engine and aimed his ship at the black hole now engaging hyper speed, accessed the crate given by the Commodore and loaded the faulty cells into the engine. The engine charged up and the ship popped out of the space into the black hole. Nothing. Blackness filled his vision every few seconds, like someone covering him with a cloth. He could not keep his eyes open. He opened his eyes to see his ship crashed on a beach; a beautiful orange sun starting to descend into the water. The ocean reflected the amazing hues on the water surface. He jumped up as he remembered he entered a black hole and was still alive.

Aakash tried to call home base.

‘Come in home base, this is Corporal Aakash, I entered the black hole and now I am on an unknown planet.’

Only the radio signals responded back.

He kept trying to transmit to his planet but, neither the GPS system responded, nor his communication devices answered. Aakash thought of entering the city and finding communication from inside. He withdrew the keys from the control deck and holstered his guns, AI space watch, equipment, and set off into the capital.

His watch spoke: 'Suit not required to sustain in this habitat.'

Aakash retracted his suit into his watch with a click of a button and his suit got sucked into his hand like a strong vacuum cleaner.

Aakash felt as if he was walking on the square of his home base, the unlit skyscrapers and chilly air poking his skin like shards of tiny glass reminding him of a casual December in Mumbai.

The sun was setting behind the towering buildings, millions of photons scattering in the atmosphere colouring the sky purple and blue. It was four hours and twenty-three minutes since Aakash left his spaceship; it felt like a few minutes, but time passed differently when you were stranded on an alien planet. The setting sun invited darkness in the sky in front of Aakash as he walked the roads of the capital. The capital had tons of population, people moving like ants trying to locate food. The people spoke a different language – like a low-pitched French. The capital had beautiful neon light banners everywhere. It felt like a splash of colour in the city.

Aakash said to his watch: 'Bethany, translate all written and spoken information into my contact lenses and earpiece.'

Upon a blink of his eye everything was translated into English.

'Language translated to English from language no. IND027001,' Bethany declared.

Aakash got startled when he realised the language number. He quickly asked Bethany, 'is this language in the official directory?'

'No, but somehow it is stored in my system,' Bethany said.

Aakash thought that this was suspicious.

He spoke into his watch. 'Bethany, where is the planetary communication system?'

'It's a few blocks away, starting navigation now,' Bethany replied.

Aakash went up to an office located on a street with tall brick facade buildings; the office was on a narrow concrete road, and its hoarding read, 'Planetary communication system.'

Aakash entered the store. The store had no one in it, and all files were stacked on top of each other.

'Anyone home?' Aakash asked.

A person jumped from behind the counters and asked, 'yes, how may I help you?'

'I am Aakash from Earth, I want to transmit a code back home. Can you help me?' Aakash inquired.

The guy raised his eyebrows. 'What? That's the other side of the galaxy. We can only transmit messages in our own solar system.'

Aakash slumped his shoulders as if he were half expecting this answer.

'What's your name?' Aakash asked.

'I am Pico. What is yours?'

'I am Corporal Aakash from Indirian space fleet. Is there any way we can communicate with my home?'

'For a signal that large, we need to use the Supreme Leader's comms. That's available in the factory where he oversees all work.'

'Cool can you take me to him?'

Pico looked at Aakash up and down.

'It would take 5,000 dimunds.'

Bethany flashed a light from his watch and spoke up. 'Five thousand dimunds is too much, we can give you one gold biscuit. That's 3,500 dimunds.'

'Fine,' said Pico.

Aakash looked at his watch nodding with a gentle smile.

Pico and Aakash sat inside a vehicle that had four wheels and a round steering wheel. They drove off from the city to the factory. In between there were lots of huts; it looked like there was no electricity in the area as several people gathered near hand pumps and had to manually motor the water out and fill their personal pots.

'Why are these people kept here like this?' Aakash asked.

'They are the workers. The lower-class society. They all work for the leader in the mines and earn daily wages.'

'These people don't have access to basic necessities.'

'Change takes time; our leader is going to take care of it soon.'

'You know your planet is supposed to be on our database, your Supreme Leader never filed it on the system.'

'What does that mean?' asked Pico.

'It means that whoever your Supreme Leader is has messed up big time.'

Silence enveloped them.

'What kind of work do you do in the factory?' asked Aakash.

'I work in the crystal sorting section.'

'What kind of crystals?'

'They are blue crystals we cut and sort in the factory.'

The car entered a giant compound into the premises of a huge building made from stacked giant grey blocks. It had large tubes protruding from its sides, which belched black smoke out into the atmosphere.

'Come, let me show you our headquarters,' said Pico.

Pico escorted Aakash inside the factory and showed the guards his ID card. The guards quickly opened the doors, and they went in.

Pico took him into the sorting room where workers brought in crates of fuel cells.

'We sort and process the fuel cells to check and calculate their potency,' said Pico. 'Fuel cell cutting and distribution takes place in the distribution room. Do you want to take a look inside?'

'We should probably meet your leader?' Aakash said.

'It won't take long.'

They reached a distribution room.

Seeing it Aakash's eyes widened.

'This is a fuel cell crystal,' he said. 'Why do you need these, if your planet does not even have the technology to use them in spaceships?'

Pico's forehead formed wrinkles.

'I do not know? We have been making them since the Supreme Leader arrived ten years back. It is our work.'

'I know what this is... Yours is a planet that has abundance of this material. Your Leader is using your people to mine this fuel crystal. Your people could be Lords, each one of them. Instead, you have had your resources expropriated from your own lands.'

'I do not know, the Supreme Leader seemed so good always. He is so proud of our hard work,' said a confused Pico.

'He is taking advantage of you and your people; I have this stuff in my spaceship.'

Pico did not say anything.

'I should shut this building down and blow it to smithereens...'

said Aakash.

Pico turned to Aakash. 'We can't do that. It would destroy our lives.'

'We must do it Pico. These people are taking advantage of your people,' said Aakash.

‘Welcome,’ said a voice.

Aakash turned around and drew his gun in a flash. He saw a guy with dark eyes and green coloured skin. He squinted his eyes. ‘You are the guy I bumped into on Arion! How are you here?’

The man smiled.

‘Great question, though think, Corporal – who do you think brought you here in the first place?’

The colour on Aakash’s face disappeared.

‘You set the scrambler on my ship and brought me here, but why?’

The person smirked.

‘I will tell you, but not so soon.’

Half a dozen armed guards came into the room, with armour that had an ethereal glow and their sleek rifles hummed with life emitting a beam of energy as they pointed towards Aakash.

Aakash held steadfast.

‘I am High Commander Stanley McNamara, and you are going to rot in our prisons for the rest of your life along with Pico, who thought our base could be treated like a tourist park.’

‘You can go to hell!’ Aakash said. ‘I know what you are doing here, exploiting these people. If anyone from Earth finds out what you have done...’

‘And who will tell them? It will not be you now, will it?’ Stanley smirked. ‘Guards, take him to the dungeon, Eldorath needs feeding.’

As the soldiers approached, Aakash dropped his weapon and put his hands in the air. The guards cuffed Aakash and Pico and escorted them away. He saw the smirk on the High Commander’s face and felt heat rising within him.

Aakash was thrown into a cell and Pico was taken away. The guards took all his weapons and equipment.

His blood boiled with the thought of the High Commander's treason to Indirian government. He sat on a wooden bench behind the iron bars. The stone flooring was new for him; he had never seen such antiquated architecture. The room was long and dark with some form of illumination: what seemed like torches of fire were bolted onto the walls. There was only one small grilled window that overlooked the vast ocean. Somewhere out there in the darkness was his ship.

He sat there for hours. At one point a guard slipped some sloppy viscous food under the heavy wooden door. He did not like the taste at first but since his stomach growled, he took some bites. It tasted like boiled potatoes and eggs mashed together. The food slipped quickly into his stomach like a slithering snake.

'Get up dimwit; it's your time to feed the beast.'

Two soldiers entered Aakash's cell, taking him away.

They shepherded him towards the stadium and handed him a sword and a helmet. They strapped Aakash with dainty armour and shoved him into a giant stadium. He tried to adjust his eyes to the glaring sun, covering his face with his hand. He then saw hundreds of people, all sitting, cheering, and screaming. People threw cans at him which spilled liquid on the ground.

The ground covered in sand let out heat haze and felt like eggs could boil here if left out a couple of minutes. Stanley stood on a podium in the middle of the stadium with a robe and a staff. He announced: 'Let the feeding begin.'

'ARRRRHHHHH,' a heavy voice bawled.

Aakash stood in the arena in a small helmet, armour, and a sword. The beast bashed through the gate, entering the arena. Aakash jumped back like a mouse seeing a big cat. The beast was a huge brown Eldorath – a bear-like animal with scales on her back,

sharp nails and teeth. The beast growled and moved towards him. He vaulted and moved away. Aakash tried to run up at the beast and hit her with his sword, but the beast swiped him away as if she were swatting a fly.

When the Eldorath approached him once more, Aakash noticed that, despite its speed, it was not nimble and could not turn quickly. When the beast flew past, Aakash swiftly climbed upon its back and aimed his sword at its head. He pierced his sword right into its brain. The Eldorath still moved her arms and legs for a few moments and her eyes moved around. After half a minute, the beast fell on to the ground. The crowd fell silent before a loud cheer erupted everyone screamed: 'Spaceman! Spaceman! Spaceman!' The guards handcuffed him, escorting him to the dungeon.

'The Intruder from Earth killed my Eldorath, Supreme Leader. She was one of a kind,' hissed McNamara.

'Patience, High Commander, I have another plan to make our prisoner cough up the code for packages he brought from Arion,' said Pico as he walked through the room.

Aakash fell onto the floor, his arms, and legs barely able to move. He climbed on the bed and slept. He dreamt of a green landscape flowing for acres. A beautiful sun warming his skin, in front of him was a tanned girl wearing white running away from him. He smiled at her and started to chase her. Her giggles made him excited, and he ran behind her. Soon a lightning bolt struck the ground and a volcano erupted from the ground. The skies turned grey, and the ground turned volcano red.

Aakash woke covered in sweat. When his vision came back, he got startled because Pico was standing there smiling.

'How did you get here?' asked Aakash.

'Through the door.'

'I mean, how did they let you in?'

'I have my ways, Corporal,' winked Pico. 'I am here to give you your weapons and smuggle you out of the prison.'

Pico handed him his weapons and equipment and they both moved out of the dungeon. There he saw the two guards, unconscious and bleeding from their heads.

'Pico, did you kill them?'

'No, just made them go to sleep.'

Aakash got a nauseous feeling in his gut. He ignored it and pushed through. They both exited the factory and sat in Pico's car. Pico started to drive like someone was trying to chase him. Aakash held onto the grab handles on the roof of his passenger side above the window.

'Woah, easy there Pico, I don't think anyone is following us.'

'Guards could be alerted anytime; I don't want to risk it.'

They drove to the beach where Aakash's ship was. Pico slammed on the brakes and skidded to a halt. Aakash went into the spaceship and started the transmitter that ran on solar power in the ship.

'The transmitter is working, I can communicate with my people, call them here and get out as fast as possible. Pico, give me the keys to the ship.'

'Oh sure, why don't you open your crates first.'

'Pico? I will show them later, give me the keys first.' Aakash turned around to see Pico aiming a gun at his head. He stepped back startled, his breathing rapid.

'I tried opening the case but with the technology on this dirt planet, I don't think that's possible,' Aakash said. 'Why are you doing this, Pico? I thought we were friends. Who even are you?'

‘Should I laugh? Why would you even trust me? Who you think scrambled your ship?’ Pico moved in. ‘I am the Supreme Leader of this planet.’

Lights flickered in the spaceship.

‘You were sent to this planet for surveillance, and instead you posed as an overlord?’ said an infuriated Aakash.

‘It’s the money. I can even buy your government now.’

‘Not everyone is up for sale,’ rebutted Aakash.

‘Smart ass, huh? Well use that mouth to reveal the password to this case.’

‘All it contains are power cells, just like those mined on this planet. Why are you after it?’

‘Bugs like you do not even know what you are carrying. This is the next revolution in fuel cells. It is going to make my crystals obsolete. I want what they have.’ Pico powered up the gun. ‘Chop-chop, open it NOW!’

Aakash approached the case, with his hands in the air, lowering them only to enter the password on the case.

Click, the case unlocked. Pico’s eyes gleamed green in the glow from the crystal in the case.

In a moment of excitement, Pico lowered his weapon.

Aakash moved fast and landed a punch straight into Pico’s teeth, sending blood spurting through his nose. He landed flat on the ground. His gun skittered across the floor, coming to rest under the pilot’s seat.

Aakash tried to grab the gun, but Pico held him by his arm.

Aakash kicked Pico in the face, but Pico unsheathed a blade and thrust it towards Aakash’s heart. Aakash dodged but a cut went into the side of his chest. He shoved the gun away from Pico’s reach and hit the SOS button on the ship.

The screen read: 'Location confirmed. Sending distress signal to home base.'

'It's over Pico. The government knows where I am, and they will be arriving any minute.'

'You mean in two to three business parsecs? You will be six units under the ground by then.'

'Your sense of humour will be famous in jail,' retorted Aakash.

'Ha, nobody can even touch me.'

They almost tipped as the spaceship levitated from the ground like a crane arm picking up trash.

It was the huge Mother Ship that shot a beam on to the spaceship lifting Aakash's space craft.

'Hello Pico,' a voice spoke.

Pico saw that outside a space fleet hovered in the orbit.

'Mr P... Prime Minister?'

'You have messed up badly this time. You did not report the existence of this planet. The Indirian government is not happy. Good work Corporal, sending in troops to arrest Pico, do not move.'

'Let's go home,' said the Prime Minister.

HOLLIE WILSON

Nothing. Has. Changed.

And when you're still there – the same place he left you, only a year older and just as empty – what do you call it? Is it love? Devotion? Or is it a death sentence? Nothing has changed for you, thank God. You still live and breathe the purpose he gave you. Every tender kiss reverberates through you, every affectionate gaze from someone else is an echo of all the words he ever said. There's no sign of him coming back, yet everything still means just as much as it did when he was sitting right next to you. How poetic! How wondrous it is to be able to love like that – with no bounds or barriers! But nothing has changed and that's also the problem, isn't it?

Nothing. Has. Changed.

There are no barriers and your love knows no bounds. There's poetry in everything you see because, in everything you see, you see him. And this is because you're still living and breathing the purpose he gave you, and every kiss and loving stare is echoed in every word anyone says or has ever said. Everything still means just as much as it did when he was sitting right next to you, but the chair is empty or someone else is sitting in it and you're crying and they're crying while trying their best to comfort you. They hold you while you scream because they are afraid to let you go, and all the while they're thinking 'shouldn't she be over this by now?'

But how can it be over when *nothing has changed?*

What can be done? It's not as if you ever had a choice in the matter anyway. There are no barriers but it's not as if you ever tried to keep him out, so what difference does it make? You're standing with open arms, waiting for him to take the seat next to you, writing him poems in your blood and living every day of your

life making sure nothing gets into the aperture he left in your very being. You are . . . what? What are you doing? Keeping all that space empty just in case he fits there again someday? Maybe nothing has changed for *you*, but he exploded like a dying supernova, and from the remnants of that explosion a black hole formed, and everything he once was and everything he once was with *you* got sucked into it, and this changed the entire universe. It ripped a hole right through the fabric like a pencil through a piece of paper or a knife through a chest cavity, and yet, you're still searching for him in everything you see because for you, nothing has changed.

Nothing. Has. Changed.

You are a lone star right on the edge of this black hole. You're dying out but somehow still hanging on despite the gravitational pull that everything else in the vicinity was futile to fight against. This hole is impossibly strong. It is hungry. It is loud and horrifying. It took everything else. *Everything*. You are all that survived the catastrophe and you only survived because you've been precariously perched on the edge of chasmic trenches your whole life. Your whole life *is* a black hole, and black holes can't swallow other black holes. Did you know that? The bigger ones merge with smaller ones until they are supermassive and inescapable.

Your life is an open wound that you keep sticking your fingers into so it can never heal, and it is merging with the yawning pit that he left you in and because you're still there – right where he left you – it's going to engulf you. You won't even feel the drop. It will happen while you're still hanging onto the purpose he gave you even though it's been months since you could breathe properly, and every affectionate gaze, every kiss he ever gave you is an echo of all the words he ever spoke, and your arms are thrown wide open and you're keeping his seat warm and you've left a light on and the



back door open just in case he decides to come home. You won't notice until that light has gone out and you're sinking into a dark, rotting stomach where you will be digested.

This is what loving with no bounds or barriers does to stars: it kills them. You can dress it up all you like. You can call it devotion and turn it into poetry, but a death sentence is still a death sentence with a pretty red ribbon tied around it. You know this – that you are doomed – but you stay right where you are, right where he left you, waiting for the hole to swallow you on the off chance he might climb back out of it and fall into your open arms instead.

And while you wait you carry on living and breathing the purpose he gave you and listening out for the deafening echo of every kiss and painstakingly affectionate stare he ever gave you, and you still see him in everyone and everything because for you

Nothing. Has. Changed.



JASMINA ZIMOCH

The Legend of the Favourite

Once upon a time, in a kingdom still clouded in a mist of magic, there lived a girl. But she wasn't just any girl; she was believed to be the greatest beauty this world has ever seen. Even the great Gods of old bowed their heads to her beauty and soon after she was born, they bestowed great gifts. From then on, wherever she walked, flowers would bloom even in the harshest of winters. Her touch could make a forest grow in a blink of an eye, her smile could warn off the stormy clouds. The Gods saw the girl as their equal among the people, their beloved favourite. Her name was Rusalka.

Rusalka shared her gifts with anyone in need, no matter who they were. From town to town, she'd help in any way she could. To many, such gifts and beauty would be a blessing. After all, she could've had anything she wanted in return for her gifts. Nevertheless, Rusalka preferred a simple life and to bring joy to everyone in the kingdom. But the world can be a dark place for a woman, and whatever blessings she was given would turn into a curse.

The news of Rusalka's beauty and gifts reached the furthest ends of the kingdom and with that came the storm of men wishing to be chosen by the blessed beauty. From kings and princes to common folk, all wanted Rusalka for themselves. Yet Rusalka had one wish only; to marry her one true love, a man of pure heart and kind soul. None of the men who came before her had both, and so Rusalka refused them all.

Rusalka carried on blessing the land and the people wherever she went. With her kindness and love, the kingdom grew strong. Soon, Rusalka had gained followers; people who wanted to bear witness to her power. Songs were made in her honour; tales were

written of the fair maiden whose touch could ward off sadness and pain. The people believed she was a goddess and gods themselves had loved her dearly.

One day, after one of the harshest winters, Rusalka stumbled upon a village where hunger and poverty took root. The once bright and colourful houses looked bleak and grey among the overwhelming sadness. Rusalka walked among the villagers and saw their pain; children picking rotten food off the ground, elders dancing closely with death, mothers and fathers burying their starved offspring.

Rusalka fell to her knees and cried for their loss. But as her tears rolled down her rosy cheek and disappeared in the dead soil, crops broke through. Golden meadows of wheat, barley and red and green trees of fruits and vegetables for everyone's delight as far as their eyes could see. The tears of happiness replaced those of sadness, and a great cheer sounded from the villagers for miles. The farmers rushed to their fields with wide smiles as they gathered the fruits of the earth. The villagers praised Rusalka, their saviour.

A young man walked up to Rusalka and dropped on his knees. He lowered his head and raised his palms.

'Blessed Rusalka, your kindness is beyond measure. I will dedicate my life to you if you could help me. I'm nothing but a humble fisherman, but the lake runs dry of fish. Please, spare a little of your great power and help me and there will be nothing in this world I won't do for you,' said the fisherman.

Rusalka took his hands and helped him off his knees.

'What is your name?' asked Rusalka.

'My name is Mieszko,' answered Mieszko.

'Well, Mieszko, lead me to your lake and maybe, with God's blessing, the fish will return,' said Rusalka and the two ventured deep into the forest.



The forest looked incredibly dull and lifeless; it seemed that the goddess Dziejanna had abandoned those lands. Rusalka touched every tree on her path and, as if touched by magic, the trees, bushes and flowers left their grey and murky colours and turned into a symphony of greens, reds, pinks and yellows. Colours of which the greatest of painters could only dream of. Mieszko looked around his beloved forest with pure astonishment written on his face, for he believed such magic was a subject of tales.

A sweet melody escaped Rusalka's lips; a melody so delicate it sounded like a birdsong, and indeed it was. A flock of birds filled the sky and landed on the trees. Some of them flew close to Rusalka and sat on her shoulder to accompany her song with their own.

Rusalka kept on singing the most heavenly of songs and with every note more and more animals revealed themselves; rabbits and foxes, deer and squirrels, bison and bears. All answered the call of Rusalka.



At last, Rusalka and Mieszko, along with all the creatures of the forest, reached the lake. The colour of water reminded Rusalka of death itself. Emptiness took over her kind heart and her eyes once again glistened with unshed tears. It hurt her deeply to see Mother Nature in such a state, to see the home of so many creatures empty of life. Rusalka looked upon the animals gathered around the lake, at the birds still sitting on her shoulder. She could feel their suffering as if it was her own for no one should ever have their homes destroyed.



Rusalka dropped to her knees and lowered her hands into the filthy water. She cupped the water and, just as she was about to drink from it, Mieszko screamed.

'No, you'll get sick! These waters are poisoned with whatever evil latched itself onto our land,' said Mieszko.



‘Pray with me, Mieszko. Pray with me and the Gods might come,’ smiled Rusalka and drank the dark water.

The moment her lips touched the water, a shoal of fish rushed above the surface and plunged back into its depths. Before their very eyes, the colour of the water turned into the most exquisite blue. The water became so very clear that it had become a reflection of the sky, the clouds and the sun. One by one, the animals lowered their heads and drank from the lake.

Finally, Rusalka stood up from her knees and looked back at Mieszko who, overcome by the miracle he just witnessed, was on his knees and a river of tears came down his cheeks.

‘Thank you. Thank you. By Gods, thank you.’ He rushed on his knees and bowed before Rusalka.

‘You will have much to do, Mieszko, son of Bogdan. Take care of this place and it will take care of you. Our goddess Dziejanna always shares her blessings on those who deserve it. Make sure you are one of them.’

Rusalka stayed in the village longer than ever before. She worked tirelessly on the fields to help the villagers restore what they had lost. It was a bittersweet spring as the sadness of those who had passed still lived on in the hearts of the people, but more often than not, joy has slowly taken over. Women and children finally got to sing their merry songs, the men cheerfully laughed as their families were finally safe from pain. Village elders sat in the shades of their colourful houses, weaving baskets and sharing stories of old. Peace and joy replaced hunger and pain. The fruitful fields and meadows glistened in the sun. All was right at last.

Still, the reason for Rusalka’s own happiness did not come from crops and songs alone. It came from a common fisherman, Mieszko, who made it his mission to bring fresh fish to Rusalka

every evening. At first, Mieszko had claimed that it was the only way in which he could express his gratitude and repay Rusalka's kindness. But as the days grew warmer in the spring's sun, so did their feelings for each other. What began as stolen glances and hidden smiles grew into a friendship the likes of Rusalka had never experienced before. It was happiness in its purest form.

Rusalka and Mieszko had spent every second they could together. They explored the beauty of the meadows and orchards, swam in the lake, laughed, and danced to the old songs. When the holiday of Jare Gody finally came, they made the straw doll of Marzanna and scared Mieszko's mother with it before drowning the doll in the nearby river, as tradition dictated. On Śmigus-dyngus, Mieszko would throw water on Rusalka along with all the young people, and then they'd bathe in the sunlight on the poppy fields.

The two were inseparable. No matter what task had to be carried out, Mieszko would still manage to make it one of Rusalka's greatest memories. He'd bring her wreaths of flowers he had picked out at sunrise before he disappeared in the forest. He'd make Rusalka's heart sing whenever he was near. He'd make every day special and every moment a memory worth a thousand more.

With summer came the night of Kupala, the god of love and fertility, and as many other young men and women, Mieszko and Rusalka joined the celebrations.

Yet, when others looked for love, Rusalka and Mieszko had already found it within each other, even though they wouldn't allow the words past their lips. Their young love could be as innocent and delicate as a newborn babe and just as beautiful.

The two jumped through fire together to ward off bad luck, they sent the colourful wreaths down the river, and they danced the night away in each other's arms. Surrounded by the light of the

bonfires and cheers of others, to Rusalka it was a perfect night. In that moment, Rusalka couldn't imagine ever leaving this place and the people she had come to love. If Rusalka ever got to see Paradise, she doubted she'd be as happy as she was in the arms of Mieszko, the common fisherman who had stolen her heart.

Rusalka stared at the night sky when a hand cupped her cheek.

'I would like to show you something, Rusalka. Will you come with me?' asked Mieszko.

Rusalka nodded and let Mieszko lead her away from the celebrations.

The water of the lake glistened in the moonlight. The warm breeze carried on the sweetness of summer; blossoming flowers and ripe fruits all lined up on a blanket right by the lake. The birds flew from one tree to another while singing their perfect song. It seemed as if the whole world had slowed down for Rusalka and Mieszko.

'I hope the flowers are good enough for you, Rusalka. They are, of course, not as beautiful as the ones you can grow. Everything you do is perfect and beautiful. Whatever I do it doesn't seem as good. The only thing I'm good at is fishing, so I've brought you fish, but mother said that is not how you get a girl to look at you... the flower crowns were her idea. Someone like you should be showered with flowers,' said Mieszko.

Rusalka lowered herself onto the blanket and smelled the flowers. A smile grew on her face.

'I have never gotten flowers before. No one ever made me wreaths every morning. No one ever brought me fish and then ran the other way because they're embarrassed,' silently laughed Rusalka. 'You have given me so much. You have given me more than I thought I could ever want.'

Rusalka faced Mieszko and cupped his cheek. Slowly, she brought her forehead to rest against his and closed her eyes. Every day seemed more beautiful than the last and it was all because of Mieszko. Every moment seemed like the most beautiful dream, and Rusalka prayed every night to never wake up.

‘All I’ve given you was flowers and fish. It is not enough for a goddess.’

‘My dear Mieszko, I’ve been wandering around this land from town to town, village to village, not once thinking of what the future may hold and where I may be. That is what you’ve given me; a place I want to stay in forever, memories I’ll keep close to my heart. You made me dream of my future and who I’d like to spend it with. Your flowers were diamonds to me, your fish an ambrosia. I have become selfish because my heart breaks whenever I think of not being with you and I never want to leave and fulfil my duty to others if it means I won’t get to see you.’

A lonely tear streamed down Rusalka’s cheek, but before it could drop it was caught by Mieszko’s thumb.

‘I will never leave your side, Rusalka. I will go to the very edge of the world if that’s where you’ll go. My heart, my mind and soul are yours to take and do what you please, if you’d choose me. I’m not the richest or most powerful, but I love you and I will keep on loving you until the day the sun sets in the east and rises in the west.’

Another tear, a twin to that of Rusalka’s, streamed down Mieszko’s cheek as he lowered his lips against hers.

It was a delicate kiss, as innocent as young love. It made both their hearts reach to the heavens and beat as one. The past had lost its meaning and tomorrow was of no importance to them. All that they’d ever need or want was for the kiss to never end, for their flesh to never be apart, for their souls to remain forever together.

In that moment, that delicate yet all-consuming kiss made the world disappear. They could no longer hear the birds sing or the silent stomping of the deer, nor could they hear slow footsteps walking towards them or the sound of the sword freed from its sheath.

In the blink of an eye, the happiest moment of Rusalka's life with the man she loved, had turned into a moment that would engrave itself onto her mind for all eternity.

Red splashed against Rusalka's white dress as Mieszko broke their kiss. In a heartbeat he was dragged away, his beautiful eyes slowly closing and a spot the colour of poppies grew and spilled across his white shirt. A heart-wrenching scream reached Rusalka's ears, and it took her a moment to realize that the scream was her own. She thrashed violently as the group of men, with red tainted swords, dragged Rusalka towards the lake. She cried Mieszko's name while looking at his face half covered by the flowers he picked. She cried so loud that her throat felt as if it was bleeding. Then the men pushed her under the waters of the lake.

For some time, Rusalka thought that maybe someone would come; the villagers, animals, even gods. Still, as she fought against the deathly grip of the men, she knew that no one would come. Rusalka looked at the moon and the cloud slowly covering its light, as if even the moon did not want to witness what was about to come. She was truly alone. No matter how many she had helped in her life, she had to face the emptiness of death all alone. Yet, as she was about to make peace with her fate, something else stirred in her at the thought of her lover butchered like an animal. Fury burned in her mind, and so she sent out one last prayer to the Gods and let go.



The men ran away when the delicate body of Rusalka floated on the waters. They had been following Rusalka for months, waiting for a perfect moment for their evil plan to come to fruition. There was no love in their hearts; they were made of stone, which to many is a fate far worse than death. Upon her refusal, they schemed to make her pay for the humiliation. They saw Rusalka as a beautiful thing they could own, not love. If they couldn't have her, no one could.

The Gods answered the call of Rusalka. Being blessed by the Gods was uncommon but having them weep over the death of a mortal was the rarest thing of all. The Gods have never shed a tear ever since.



Rusalka's death was unforgivable; to kill someone so kind and pure was a crime against the Gods and their laws. And so, with sadness and anger brewing in their veins, the Gods decided to bless Rusalka with one last gift; revenge. With the power of their will, they fulfilled Rusalka's last wish; her spirit transformed into something new, something that would not rest until her death and that of her lover was avenged. Something that would lure and haunt the men whose hearts are black as night. And when the Gods were done, god Weles took the body of Mieszko and carried it to his underworld kingdom; a privilege no other mortal ever received.



Under the cover of the night sky, one by one, the cruel men ventured to the forest once again. As if led by an invisible hand, they disappeared into the darkness of the trees never to be seen again. Some nights, terrifying screams could be heard but none would dare to interfere. Some of the villagers had talked about a beautiful song coming from the forest, some of a heavenly maiden bathing in the waters red as blood, but only fools dared to walk through the forest to find out.





Our tale nears its end, yet the most heart-wrenching part of it hadn't ended with Rusalka's death. The fate of Rusalka was and still is shared by others; women who fall under the greediness and savagery of men. To each of them the Gods grant the same gift as they did with Rusalka. The Gods gave them their last gift and the people gave them their new name; Rusalki. The legend says that their spirits will depart this world once their deaths are avenged and perhaps, one day, all will be free.

IV. SCRIPTS



MUSAMMAT BEGUM

Head of Suzie McFarlane

FADE IN

INT — DULL OFFICE ROOM — CENTRAL LONDON — DAY.

An INTERVIEWER and SUZIE MCFARLANE are sitting on grey armchairs facing each other. The interviewer holds the microphone closer to Suzie.

INTERVIEWER So, Suzie, who is your biggest influence in the world of art?

SUZIE *Chuckles.*

FADE OUT

FADE IN

INT — NATIONAL GALLERY, WEST LONDON, 1970

A younger version of SUZIE enters the art gallery; a sign above her reads 'Leonardo da Vinci exhibition'. She walks around and notices a red book made of leather called 'Drawings of Leonardo restored by Pompeo Leoni'. It has saltwater dripping off it. She walks towards the book to inspect the dripping liquid. Wind pushes the pages open to a sketch called 'Old Man Seated in Profile with Studies of Whirlpools'. The whirlpools in the sketch move in a circular motion. She touches one of the whirlpools and gets sucked into the book.

INT — LEONARDO'S WORKSHOP — ITALY, FLORENCE, 1508 — DAY

A vortex opens. SUZIE enters the space and bumps into LEONARDO DA VINCI. He falls onto a worktable with detailed sketches of 'codex atlanticus' flying around.

LEONARDO DA VINCI Cazzo!

SUZIE looks around in confusion. LEONARDO gradually stands back up maintaining a balance, rubbing dust off his clothes.

LEONARDO looks at SUZIE's trousers.

LEONARDO DA VINCI Buongiorno Signore...

LEONARDO looks in confusion at SUZIE's face.

LEONARDO DA VINCI Signora? I wasn't expecting guests... What brings you here? Wait! Let me clear some space.

LEONARDO removes books from an old antique armless chair.

LEONARDO DA VINCI Please sit. How can I help you?

SUZIE MCFARLANE Where am I? It's so old and worn.

LEONARDO DA VINCI Hey! Old!... Worn!... This is one of the greatest architectures of Italia! Have you not encountered Pisa?

SUZIE MCFARLANE (*confused*) How did I get here? I was... Who are you?

LEONARDO DA VINCI Wait, wait, wait too many questions. I am Leonardo da Vinci, Signora. People prefer to call me a painter, scientist or an architect. I think of myself as someone who changes the world rather than capturing it in a meaningless painting, and you?

SUZIE gasps.

SUZIE MCFARLANE The Leonardo Da Vinci!

LEONARDO smiles.

LEONARDO DA VINCI I see you are familiar with my work. So Signora, what do you do?

SUZIE MCFARLANE I'm a painter too.

LEONARDO *laughs hysterically.*

LEONARDO DA VINCI You a painter? Preposterous! A woman's duties are in the household.

SUZIE MCFARLANE Women becoming restricted to housework is meaningless, do you not think, Mr da Vinci?

LEONARDO DA VINCI I must say I admire your thinking, very interesting indeed. Why so much passion, Signora? Why not accept your fate?

SUZIE MCFARLANE I must have hope. One day I will teach art.

SALAI *enters, without a care.*

SALAI (*shouts*) Maestro! What is the meaning behind this sketch of yours?

SALAI *glances at SUZIE, raising an eyebrow.*

SALAI (*curious*) What is this woman doing here?

SUZIE MCFARLANE Um hi.

LEONARDO DA VINCI (*amused*) Salai, my boy, she has a keen interest in art.

SALAI Art, huh? Well Maestro, I did not realise you were expanding your horizons.

LEONARDO DA VINCI Ah, Salai, there is much you do not know.

SALAI (*smirking*) Maestro, did you notice her attire? It is rather... peculiar.

LEONARDO *takes a closer look at SUZIE.*

LEONARDO DA VINCI Salai, I have just completed a new invention, a gauntlet, and I need you to deliver it to my dearest friend. It is an important delivery and I trust you with this task.

SALAI (*surprised*) A gauntlet? Right now?

LEONARDO DA VINCI Yes, it is of utmost importance. I would not ask if it were not. Hurry along.

SALAI leaves quietly, disappointed. LEONARDO turns towards SUZIE.

LEONARDO DA VINCI Now, I have a proposal that may perhaps interest you. I will teach you art and in exchange I would like to draw you to develop one of my new techniques I am trying to accomplish in my portraits. I am tutoring that young fellow also; I think tutoring a woman will be an interesting experiment. If you are up to the challenge, of course...

SUZIE MCFARLANE I appreciate the offer, but I can't possibly stay here. I don't even know how I'm here or if this is really happening but I need to get out of here.

LEONARDO sighs.

LEONARDO DA VINCI This is real. In fact. Beyond the boundaries of conventional constraints, my dear, you are also bound by a scientific discovery.

SUZIE looks shocked.

LEONARDO DA VINCI You see, the whirlpool vortex – the portal that brought you here is a part of my scientific exploration.

LEONARDO points at 'Old Man Seated in Profile with Studies of Whirlpools'.

LEONARDO DA VINCI In my experimentation of this sketch, I came across a phenomenon that is quite complex indeed. The

portal you entered will remain closed until noon, according to the calculations I have conducted. I must admit, I have not personally explored the full parameters of the portal. The question of where you came from and whether the portal will lead you to where you were before you arrived is a scientific mystery that remains uncertain.

SUZIE MCFARLANE (*displeased*) So, I'm stuck here.

LEONARDO DA VINCI Until noon, yes. Well... theoretically speaking of course. Hmm, I guess women are not capable of anything after all. I suppose I should not have expected much, given your ridiculous attire Capito? No wonder there are no great minded women in literature, philosophy, art...

SUZIE MCFARLANE (*enraged*) What's wrong with my clothes?

LEONARDO DA VINCI I do not think the Florentine guards will approve of your choice, Signora. There are so many to choose from. Silk or wool? What material are you wearing? I simply cannot identify the fabric? I haven't come across anything like it!

SUZIE MCFARLANE (*offended*) It's denim. And are these your opinions or are you following what you have been told is right? Is it a big deal?

LEONARDO DA VINCI Not even the puttane from the brothels would dare wear trousers.

SUZIE MCFARLANE (*sarcastic*) Are all women just 'puttane' to you, Mr da Vinci?

LEONARDO DA VINCI Not at all. And please call me Leonardo. You think highly of women, yet this world is dominated by men. How are you so hopeful you can teach? Women are beautiful creatures, I admit, but they are mere accessories to society, nothing more.

SUZIE MCFARLANE (*frustrated and annoyed*) Women are much more than accessories Leonardo; we're equally valuable to men in society.

LEONARDO *laughs hysterically.*

LEONARDO DA VINCI Equal... To men... Oh you sure do make me laugh Signora! Caterina Sforza is a strong and independent woman, but she is only in power under her husband.

SUZIE MCFARLANE She may not seem like she has done much in your eyes just by being in power, but does this not prove to you that women are more than housemaids? Women have a lot of potential for the future. Rosalind Franklin managed to find out the molecular structure of graphite.

LEONARDO DA VINCI Graphite! This is fascinating! I am truly inspired. I never thought women could have such powerful mindsets or a mind at all for that matter.

SUZIE *notices the 'Mona Lisa' and 'Gabinetto dei Disegni e Delle Stampe' on wooden easels.*

LEONARDO DA VINCI Let's go for a walk. We have many exciting things to discuss. I shall show you the inspiration behind this construction. Where to begin... Aha!

SUZIE and LEONARDO *leave the workshop. Enter carriage.*

FADE OUT

FADE IN

EXT — CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA NOVELLA — DAY

LEONARDO DA VINCI We have arrived. Grazie mille, Signore.

SUZIE looks around in awe. LEONARDO pays driver 15 florins. Enter church of Santa Maria Novella.

LEONARDO DA VINCI You see, a building is more than a roof over one's head. The architecture is trying to capture the unity of art and science, which I must say I find quite intriguing. I try and demonstrate this within my work also. First tell me, what do you think of Piero Della Francesca?

SUZIE gives LEONARDO a blank stare.

LEONARDO DA VINCI He practises geometry to recreate life. Almost creating an illusion. I too explore illusionism and mathematics within my work.

SUZIE MCFARLANE If you believe women are valueless, why do you draw them?

LEONARDO DA VINCI I am trying to explore the use of brush strokes. One technique I am having trouble developing is softer than smoke. I call it 'Sfumato', which is what you saw in my other piece 'Mona Lisa'. I think a feminine face would be perfect for my experimentation as their faces are very fragile and delicate.

FLORENTINE GUARDS burst in the doors.

FLORENCE GUARD 1 (*shouts*) Strega! Strega!

FLORENCE GUARD 2 Vai a avvertire la guardia!

LEONARDO DA VINCI We must leave.

LEONARDO grabs SUZIE's arm. Both run fast and enter the nearest carriage.

LEONARDO DA VINCI (*shouts to driver*) Vai!, Vai!

FADE OUT

FADE IN

INT — LEONARDO DA VINCI'S WORKSHOP — DAY

LEONARDO DA VINCI (*panicked*) Come with me. Sentite, we must open the vortex before the guards find us.

SUZIE MCFARLANE (*slightly panicked and confused*) Why are the guards after me? What did I do?

LEONARDO gathering bottles of substances.

LEONARDO DA VINCI There's no time. It is noon exactly and you must leave. Now!

Leonardo pours substances on 'Old Man Seated in Profile with Studies of Whirlpools' page. Vortex opens; whirlpools begin to move.

LEONARDO DA VINCI It was nice to meet you. I hope our paths cross again, Signora. Your name escapes me...

Loud knocking on door. Bang bang bang.

FLORENCE GUARD 3 (*shouts*) Leonardo!

FLORENCE GUARD 4 (*shouts*) We know you're in there! Open the door!

LEONARDO pushes SUZIE into the vortex.

LEONARDO DA VINCI (*relieved*) Let us hope this concludes our unexpected visitors for today. I must be cautious, being associated with matters of such... magic, might tarnish one's reputation and that is a concern I would much rather avoid.

FADE OUT

FADE IN

INT — NATIONAL GALLERY, WEST LONDON, 1970 — DAY

SUZIE falls out of the book into the room of the exhibition. She quickly gets up, pauses and familiarises herself with the environment. She walks towards the exit while looking around. 'Head of a woman' drawing is behind her (showing resemblance between sketch and SUZIE; 'Date: 1508' and 'Head of a woman' is emphasised on display.)

FADE OUT

FREDDIE ROLLS

Golden Dream (Episode 101)

INT. ALCHEMIST'S FACILITY — HEAD OFFICE — NIGHT

CLOSE ON: *The back of a bald man's head. Filling the centre of the frame as an ominous sphere. . .*

Slowly, we pan up to reveal a small crowd standing before this man's desk. To the left, there's a trio of scientists wearing lab coats. Looking fearful. On the right, there are two shadowy figures. A man and a woman, both dressed in formal office clothes. As this crowd waits for the man to finally speak, we have an opportunity to take in our surroundings. This office was likely once a corporate space, but has now been refurbished with antique furniture and luxurious carpeting. Topped with dusty bookshelves and a Renaissance painting, this is real Bond villain stuff from our bald man. At long last, the man behind the desk exhales deeply. The crowd hold their breath. Ready to hear some words of wisdom from the mysterious ALCHEMIST. . .

ALCHEMIST I am not a superstitious man. I do not believe in higher powers of authority. There is no explanation, to my mind, as to why good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. It seems to me, that there is no rhyme or reason for why some of us are rich and some of us are poor, why some of us prosper and some of us suffer, and why some of us are intelligent and some of us are *stupid*. Yet... such disparity does exist. And it can be seen infecting every corner of every civilisation.

The ALCHEMIST rises from his armchair and stands before the crowd. Growing more passionate. We remain behind him, shrouding him in anonymity for now. . .

ALCHEMIST And I *hate* it. It makes me sick. It shakes me to my core and so, today, I say, 'No more.' (*Gestures to crowd*) The work we will

do, and the work we have already devoted so much of ourselves to, will one day ensure that this disparity is eradicated forever. *That* is our mission here, and it is a mission that I love with all my heart. If we level the playing field, if we can ensure that all the world's players possess equal potential... then we shall usher in a golden age for human prosperity – the likes of which lesser scientists have only ever dreamed of.

Something changes in the ALCHEMIST now. The back of his head is straighter. His posture improved, authoritative. This is a man who wants the world at his fingertips.

ALCHEMIST (*exhales deeply*) We start... today. And we will not stop until we either die trying, or our skin is kissed by the colour of this golden dream...

It's a laboured metaphor, but one that resonates with the ALCHEMIST's adoring crowd. At once, the scientists and the shadowy figures erupt into APPLAUSE. And it's not a polite smattering of claps. His crowd is passionate. The ALCHEMIST bows his head, basking in the glory of this moment. Ready to fight for his dream...

INT. QUEEN ACADEMY – MATHS CLASSROOM – DAY

THWACK!! Filling the frame, a maths exam paper is slapped onto a wooden desk. And it's not good news.

In harsh red pen, scribbled angrily at the top of the paper, the result reads: '17/50 – RIDICULOUS!!'

Its unfortunate recipient, LUKE PARKER (15), stares down at the number. Grunts and rolls his eyes. He was hoping for better, but he knows he deserves this... Knowing what's coming next, he slowly stares up at his less-than-impressed maths teacher, MR VARNHAM.

MR VARNHAM (*drily*) Well, would you look at that, Luke. It's better than the last test!

LUKE (*winks*) Cheers, sir. I worked hard!

Muttering obscenities under his breath, MR VARNHAM moves past LUKE and towards the back of the class. LUKE turns and watches him, sniggering as he approaches the desk of two particular students. . . BEN WESTON (16) and HARRY SCOTT (15) are grinning over at LUKE as MR VARNHAM delivers their papers back. Clearly, none of these three friends care much for maths. . . LUKE raises his eyebrows towards them, trying to gauge what their results are like. There's no way of telling from BEN's or HARRY's expression, but then. . .

MR VARNHAM Looks like we're three for three today! That sounds like. . .

(*points at Ben*) Detention for you. . .

(*points at Harry*) Detention the sequel. . .

(*turns to Luke*) And even more detention!

The other students in the class all burst out laughing. Meanwhile, the smirks have vanished from the faces of the three boys. Detention?! Seriously. . .?!

As VARNHAM marches to the front of the class, LUKE slumps himself in his chair. Looking defeated. . .

HARRY (*pre-lap*) He's such a fucking prick!!

EXT. BROOKGATE RESIDENTIAL PLAYGROUND — AFTERNOON

After school. The three boys have taken refuge in a rundown park, loitering near a bench. Beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, ready to vent. Our fictional borough of Brookgate is modelled off the more deprived areas of South London. Litter on the street, dingy alleyways in every direction. It's not very romantic. . .

BEN I dunno about you, but I actually revised for that one! Ain't because I didn't do the work. I just didn't *understand* the work!

LUKE Yeah, right. So, was there another Ben on his PS5 playing *Call of Duty* till 3 am. last week then?

HARRY (*chuckles wheezily*) Nah, don't be harsh, mate. Having a nice relaxing evening is so much better for the soul than algebra. (*Beat*) Anyway, speaking of relaxing, anyone want to go hunting for some glue?

BEN No, hang on, hold your horses. Let me explain first. I'd argue, any day of the week, that *Call of Duty* is a *more* educational experience than what happens in a maths class. Think about it! World War Three is gonna happen any day now. For that, you need to know how to shoot a gun. Not how to measure angles in a fucking triangle! And...

VROOM!! Interrupting BEN's inspired monologue, a car suddenly screams by on the road adjacent to the park. The boys spin to face its direction. Watching as this cheap and beaten car hurtles by. No clue what its driver is up to, other than they're in a heck of a rush... But then, a brown package is thrown from the car! With near pinpoint precision, it slams onto the playground surface just a few metres away from the three boys.

LUKE The hell is that...?!

With the car long gone, the boys walk up towards the package. Luke puts out his cigarette and picks it up. He turns the package over and we see, printed in perfectly neat capitals: 'TO HELP WITH YOUR NEXT EXAM.'

HARRY (*spooked*) Nah, what the fuck...

BEN Quit your crying, Harry. It'll be Joseph or one of his other twats joking around...

Curious, LUKE rips open the package. Peers in and frowns at what he sees. He tips onto the ground. . . About a dozen blister packs of blue pills. Each blister containing ten circular pills. . .

HARRY (*suddenly excited*) Holy shit. Fucking jackpot! What are these, ecstasy tablets?! That'll help calm the nerves before another test from Varnham!

LUKE Christ, Harry, I don't even know if we should go for them! We don't know where they came from!

HARRY Suit yourself. I'm going in!

Snatching a blister up right away, HARRY pops a pill. He takes it with a swig of beer, cackling excitedly. LUKE and BEN share a glance. Not as confident about following in HARRY's footsteps. But eventually, they shrug and take hold of a blister for themselves. . .

TWENTY MINUTES LATER

WIDE ON: *The playground area. The boys are slumped against a metal slide. Sipping their beer. Waiting. . .*

BEN (*finally*) Anything on your ends?

HARRY Nah. They gotta be duds.

The boys fall into silence, starting to lose hope. . . Deflated, LUKE stares at the ground, twirling his bottle in his hand idly. But after a few moments, he frowns. Eyes widening, he sits bolt upright. . .

LUKE (*to himself*) Fuck, why did I get that SOHCAHTOA question wrong?! I just realised, there was one about a ladder against a wall. That was three sides of a triangle, and I just. . . didn't even realise!

BEN (*scoffs*) Yeah, alright, Einstein. I reckon I took one look at that question and thought, 'What the fuck am I doing talking about a ladder? My window cleaner should know how to put his ladder against a wall, it ain't my problem to solve.'

HARRY Nah, Luke's right. All you had to do after that was use Pythagoras to measure the hypotenuse.

And now, another silence. But not the deflated one that came before. A stunned, shocked silence. LUKE and BEN stare at HARRY for several moments, mouths hanging open. In case it wasn't obvious, triangle theory is not HARRY's usual conversation subject. . .

LUKE (*suddenly*) Harry, what's 926 times 77?

HARRY (*without thinking*) 71,302.

The boys exchange stunned glances. BEN takes out his phone and is about to check the sum in a calculator. . .

BEN But it's right. I was thinking of that number. I know it's right. . .

A long, stunned beat. Until finally, the eyes of all three boys come to rest on the brown package beside them. The pieces of the puzzle finally falling into place. . . Letting out a cry of amazement, HARRY leaps to his feet and runs towards the swings. He climbs onto it, hanging by the chains and screams with all his might. . .

HARRY I'm a genius! Those are. . . those are fucking genius pills! (*breathlessly*) Ben, go on! 811 times 46?!

BEN (*punches slide*) 37,306! Check it, Luke!

LUKE (*laughing*) What the fuck for?! We're all thinking that number!

Shrieking with happiness, BEN runs up towards the swings and starts climbing them as well. Almost hugging HARRY, screaming with laughter. Two Einsteins walking. As the others celebrate wildly, LUKE remains where he is. Smiling quietly

to himself, astonished. . . After a few moments, his eyes wander towards the now empty roadside. Amazed, but certainly confused, he keeps staring in its direction. What just happened?!

WIDE ON: The playground and the road. With questions left unanswered and an adventure just beginning. . .

V. POETRY AND PROSE FROM THE UNIVERSITY
OF GREENWICH CREATIVE WRITING STAFF



SIMON HARDEMAN

My Own Penelope (Hastings 2023)

I'm sitting on the West Hill watching silhouetted container-ships
ride the razor horizon
As hatchet-faced gulls stalk me and my sandwich.
The sea's a pale and luminous moiré.

Old Patricia was in her doorway again as I walked here, croakily
cheery in the same pink-patterned pyjamas and holding another
roll-up,
Though today in a black medieval skullcap instead of last night's
bandit-starred beret.
Her daughter was there again too, as facially flushed and tightly
crushed by fathomless desperation.

Some days the horizon is a guillotine-guide that sharply scores
where sea gives way to sky,
And others, like today, there's just a bright and hazy cross-fade,
A liminal wall of white-out mist that just now threatens a distant
smear of sail.

Anxious lovers must have stood on the ramparts to my right and
raked that rim
For their own Odysseus to emerge from the milk of memory,
Breathless at the moment when the hazy fade began to coalesce and
darken.

Can I keep hold of my smudge, like those other Penelopes must
have hoped?

Or will I look down to my notebook, and then look up again and
find it gone
From the water that's now high up its stony Sussex rim in the tepid
August rain?

Far past that sail there's a flat and sandy beach where children chase
across the strand to be the first to reach the blue of what's now
grey to me.

But I'm just my own Penelope, silently watching the ships still
sliding on the edge of the world, barely a hand's width further
on.

Or perhaps I'm old Patricia, fag in hand and future gone, and only
watching and waiting for one unwelcome man.

All You Had Left

We were built on a lie so I couldn't complain
When the lies got too much and the silence too plain.
But the picture I painted of love in the fields
Was peopled with cupids and noble ideals.
There were no vipers or poisonous toads
Or lowering clouds or dangerous roads.
I liked to live there but I spared you the fuss;
Yes that was the picture I painted of us.
I covered it up when I uncorked your skin
And lived there alone even lying within.

We were built on a lie so I couldn't object
When deceit upon silence was all you had left.

C for Christmas

Cold cityscape.

Clear celestial constellations circle calmly.

Commuters crowd chilly C-roads.

Cyan cineramas crust cottages. Cards come.

Children crave clues, catch colds. Cynics cast caustic comments.

Closeted celebrants clutch corks, chugging champagne.

Caramelised course chases course.

Cheers! Carols!

Cue collective comatose collapse.

Christmas,

Clearly.

The beach was a long gentle curve, maybe a mile in all. At the southern end was a rocky headland where one of the big rocks had been carved into the shape of a human head that looked back along the beach with the impassivity of ages past, ages that had seen the beach first deserted, then used for hundreds, thousands of years as a home for fisher people, and then, for the last brief blink of the eye of time, the kind of place travellers like me think we've discovered. And it was beautiful. Not only was the curve a perfect one, just enough to make the beach seem secluded but shallow enough to give it a sweeping length, but the angle of the palms that overlooked it was just right too, somehow in ideal concert with the arc of the sand, both part of what might be a kind of golden ratio for these things. It was as though someone had taken a straight beach, with a line of vertical palms, and gently pushed the centre back, pushing against the elasticity of nature until they arrived at the most pleasing set of numbers. It also created a kind of exciting tension in the possibility that this bow could spring back to straight again, so the beauty was somehow accentuated by this frisson of impermanence.

At the northern end was a small, heavily wooded island separated from the rocks of that extremity by a narrow channel. I never went to the island. It seemed too dense to be interesting, and didn't have any beaches.

When I first went to the beach, we stayed in shacks on stilts a few metres behind the line of palms. I never understood why the shacks were on stilts – the tide never came in that much. Perhaps there were nasty animals about, though I never saw any. And people

seemed happy enough to wander about at ground level without worrying about snakes or tigers or crocodiles. I'm not even sure that crocodiles live on beaches. Perhaps it was to make the accommodation even more exotic, though there was no need.

The beach was one of the two most beautiful I had ever seen. The other was in Africa, in Cameroon, near Kribi, where, in order to reach it, the two overland trucks in which I crossed that continent had to push the jungle down. That beach was less classically proportioned, but it had a little lagoon, a central spit of land with a desiccated tree for shade, and an island 30 metres from the shore where swimmers could prise off oysters that we later cooked on a fire on the sand. Kribi is now the home of an oil terminal.

Palolem was simpler. But, like Kribi, it did what the best beaches should do and faced west, so that every evening was the symphony of a sunset. I never tire of watching the different ways the sun can disappear, whether in cloud-mediated blazing glory, or in a hazy, minimalist fade, or in crisp, staring power. It has the same transfixing quality as a campfire. Who can resist the hypnotic effect of flames? Everyone ends up staring into them as though the greatest profundities are being transmitted with the heat and glow directly into their brains, and it's the same with sunsets. Perhaps it's the way they both blaze with impermanence. Each fire, each sunset, is a reminder that all things end, are over, collapse, but they do it in a way that awes human beings, comforts them even, filling them with a kind of counter-intuitive warmth. Waves do this too, but waves don't have the enveloping cosiness; waves tell us we're going to die with a cool, soothing, hypnotic, sound. Maybe that's why beaches are so powerful to us. They combine a blinding, eye-watering, once-a-day visual explosion of inescapable ending with the endless shushing rhythm of tiny beginnings and ends.



This is one of the problems of cities. Away from these rhythms of nature, people begin to think they are immortal. Well, why not? Cities are 24/7. They never end, and the things in them don't end – buildings, roads, etc – unless the people in the cities decide to end them and replace them with something better. Everything is in the power of the inhabitants, who have created their own eternity of brick and tarmac and steel and glass. There's even a city called 'The Eternal City'. And this impression of permanence that cities have informs the way people in them act. If we can create eternity, then we can create all kinds of other absolutes – that's the expectation, in any event. So when society doesn't work as well as we think it should, when hospitals, roads, the banks, politicians, justice, schools... when they screw up, it seems an affront to us. We CAN create our own perfect, permanent, place in the universe, we tell ourselves, and so we get very angry with the people we find to blame for suggesting that our world can still be relative, cyclical, evanescent.

But most of us like going to the beach for our holidays, and perhaps this is a sign that somewhere in our souls we crave the reality principle made real that is the shoreline, with its combination of inescapable rhythms of coming and going, rising and falling, life and death. This rhythm, a subtle, subconsciously perceived music of existence, draws us to leave our eternal cities and bathe in the sights and sounds of the fleetingness that is our own essence because in a curious way it is comforting. Everything ends, everything changes. So that's alright then. It's the kind of message we need when we're faced with a two-hour traffic jam, or an oppressive, uncaring government.

But then, typically, we try to package the sensation, to gild the lily. Like at Café del Mar on Ibiza, where the sunset is co-opted into a *son et lumière* that thousands sit on the rocks every day



to experience. When I was there the DJ played Pink Floyd's *Shine On You Crazy Diamond* and synchronised it to the sunset with such precision that, as the last bead of sun disappeared, the loud guitar solo exploded into the dusk. The DJ was taking possession of the moment, making it part of their performance, a performance with an implicit repeatability, and implicit permanence, an implicit victory over the implacable end that is the sunset. We can still party! We can play loud music to banish the rhythm of the waves! We can do it again and again and for as long as you want! The sun became a just a sideshow in the eternal city-on-the-sea that stays the same, day after perfect day.

But we are cheated by this. We only properly experience things that change. Touch something with your finger. Leave it there. Don't move it. How long is it before you can't feel what you are touching? Not long. Now gently move your finger a few millimetres. Suddenly you can feel the surface again. Try looking at something – anything – without moving your gaze. It'll take a little longer, but gradually a kind of whiteness begins to overlay everything. Try it on one of these words. Stay with it for a bit. Watch it happening. And then, once it has, move your eyes fractionally. See the colour, the contrast coming through the crack between where you were looking and where you are now. Things that are immutable, or that appear so, lose their power to stimulate. So, away from the rhythms of the natural world, in cities where the colour of the buildings stays the same week in, week out, where the colour of the ground does the same, where the darkening sky is banished by artificial light, is it any wonder that millions seek the packaged, artificial, illusory changeability of TV?

Back on Palolem beach at sunset, no one watched TV. But even Palolem had to change. When I first visited it was as I've described,



a swing of sand under a sway of palms, white breakers marking both ends, dotted with a few locals and a few tourists. The second time I came, the fringe of the palms was interrupted every couple of metres by huts covered in bright blue plastic, like a hairline with the teeth of a blue comb poking through by half a metre. The golden ratio of curve and angle now had a loud, jagged third component. And under these canopies were bars and beachfront cafes and restaurants, each with a toenail foothold on the beach because the beach, being on the beach, was so important, because it was such a beautiful beach, or at least it was before the need to be on it destroyed it.

I met a man who had arrived from the eternal land of America and, on the first day, had gone straight to this beach with his family. The first thing he had done was to rush into the waves, to be part of the crashing, exhilarating, ebb and flow. As he did so he stepped on a broken beer bottle and lacerated his foot so badly that he ended up with it swathed in bandages for two weeks afterwards. He moved to a quieter beach, which was where I met him, and where all he could do was sit and listen to the waves and watch the sun go down every evening.

Which, actually, is what I did too, every evening, sometimes from the beach and sometimes in the water, bathing in the liquid orange until it ran away, seeped over the horizon into the new day of someone watching the day begin on the other side of the world.

CHERRY SMYTH

Wet Could Blind Them

A mountain makes the soul seen,
Its heart, if it should need one,
beats in a ruckle of boulders,
balancing a door into millennia,
buckled by a single human flaw.
We bring what it knows of wisdom
down from the summit, but it washes
away in the next hard rain, as we dash
for cover, eyes averted, as if more wet
could blind them. Looking back, I am glad
for the times, when I urged my lover,
‘Take me,’ at the top of stark, and my cries
bannered from glory’s utmost body,
to bodiless, long beyond the peak.

Planted

I lie on grass,
the warm wind
lifting to cirrus,
the blue potting
a sea blue in the hole
between headland and hill.

Pulleen is all I can be
this morning, the birds casting
a hook of song between trees
and something else floating
around my tadasana,
tugging me to the mountains,
becoming stone and rock and ridge,
a small bit cooler.

Is consciousness changed
by living in a body?

I unlatch it for a nanosecond,
let it travel, inhabit what I've forgotten –
the plantain swaying, the mess of dug-up
dandelions – what long roots you have! –
the buttercups doing a dub-step,
wet with sunshine, the butterfly's snap
of white air, mown loops on the field
turning Robert Mangold,

and where I can't see
on the flat stretch of bog
the tiny white manes pinched
and nodding and the feeling
of the love of a horse found in books.

Whatever entered my body,
some massless mass,
will go beyond it,
a self, painted in cloud
of this self.

I read myself in skyline, earth, sea,
as if they wrote me and will go on
writing me when I'm gone.

ROSIE ŠNAJDR

Bingo the Drunkman

In arrears: ear-rent for knight errant. Errant night rent by Drunkman erring. Errorprone. Drunkman's speech wound. Wound round in inner ear. Inertia-reels whirring. Errand of mercy me. Mercy me. O Drunkman I hate you get up.

Errata.

1. Drunkman mercy me. Legitimate object of objection. I am, not he. Unwounding the capacity to wound; avowing the wounds legitimacy. Gendering the wounds legitimacy. I am not he.

2. Drunkman mercy brokes no he-he. No he-he him. Ok, once. Once there was hoo-hoo. A he-he he hoo-hoo. Whopper whorling whoring hoo-hoo. No homo but. No homo but homo butt once. A reel man can slip. A reel man schtick sticking in inertia-reels. A real man can-can. Drunkman can broke no he-he.

3. Marry her. Marry her. Why won't you? Marry her. You can, you know. It's fine. I will buy. I will buy you. A drink. No thank you, Drunkman. I hate you get up.

4. Drunkman have many ho-ho friend. Homofiend. Homofend. Homofiller. Homofont. A, he-he, hoo-hoo friend. A teen girl screen girl on lustrate. A teen girl screen girl good-friend-time. A her-her. With purple hair. You know her? No? So much uncommon, incommoning, incoming, so much in common in coming. Tell me what you do in bed?

5. How do you do? How do you do it? The he-he do in the do-do. Said that did I that I did that once? Once. No homo. How do you do? How do you hoo-hoo do though? How do hoo hoo do the do? Wandering whets the point.

6. The errorman, reels whereing to stimulus us. A semi- semi- semi-seminal premise. Here is the curé. see? A curette to malt our bitter. A wand-waving paster-man's seminary promise. Teach us a lesson. A bit of who's your father's all you need. A bit of how's father to turn us rite. To turn again. To turn and not turn. Teach us to sit still. That ternary premise—a bit of. Fool. A bit of. Fool. A bit of how's. Fool—the fool hows.

The Adélie Penguins

A sketch from novel-in-progress, *Telepathic Greenland Shark*:

Ten-thousand years of guano. A sole arriving on the stones; webbing slipping around it, claws catching. A lone fellow. Rock hop from rock hop, flappers levelled in balance, to plane of icesheet. Running now, upright, flaps out, full-waggle. Flop to slide on chest and then feet pedalling. A swimmer out of water. An apparition of other penguin, landing feet on ice from water on nearby ledge. There is a brief argument about this too closeness. Around about the expanse of whiteness merges to horizon in most directions and wind whips over it. Over there, a blood tide of guano surfing up the distant mountainside. In a week it will be corpuscled with white flecks of penguin chests; of penguins eye-skying; of nesters on their piles of rocks.

There will be a mate. Nosing the first of many stones up the beach. Light work. When there are some stones, I am counting on a pile. The wind across active but with little chill. Feathers stand it. Here a larger rock at the bottom of a valley. A challenge. Beak tap is not enough to starts things. A shove with bottom belly gets a roll up. Rolls down to nest in plush. Nest egg. Eye-sky a bit, to rest neck. Stone pile is out of sight; thought of which pops a pulse of anxiety. Redouble efforts. Beaking the ball of stone up hill. Footwebs sinking beneath the shale and avalanching pebbles against my purpose. Beak, beak. Near crest of hill a pause for rest is needed. On crown, ever more mates on nests, heads twitching. Rump of one up over edge of nest is spraying out a line of hot green shit.

A quick side-step sees the effluent land and up-spit at a safe enough distance. My rock! Rock, too heavy for rescue-attempt by beak snaps, tumbles down the hill. By the time I have turned small-steps to full-circle to descend to it, scree-fall burying my feet ankle-deep, it is too late. Two not-mates hang over it, each trying to give the other a good flippering. It is no longer my rock. There is a small specimen that can be plucked up. Humbling. Tired up-climb is better with this than with nothing. There will be a mate.

The flat is crowded now. Too closely nested not-mates peck out at other not-mates. Tongue-seeking spears. Angry mouths calling: Awk! Awk! Chest plumage pinked by froth of blood-spit. Pushing through, I get butt-bit, beak-butted, admonished. To what end? My scratched-out circle of future nest is already rockless. The last stone being beak-dribbled away across the sand by a fat beast of a non-mate. He eyes me, expecting an Awk. Wanting an Awk. On a ledge above a pair of non-mates jiggle their bellies, excited by the spectacle of the beach below. The left one ejaculates into the air. A poor show.

The beach is slim-peckings by now. There will be a mate. Around the corner of this red rock a mate is reclining. A glossy cock penguin humps her enthusiastically. When he straightens up and waddles off, we are finally alone. I neck arc. I beak thrust. You are glassy-eyed, beautiful, white and red-flecked, still, stiff, cold, receptive. I give up my pearls. Never will you ask me for the labour of rocks.

The Three Bears

A sketch from novel-in-progress, *Telepathic Greenland Shark*:

*I suffer many contradictions and oft-times hear it said that I do but tell
fairy tales about little animals.* (LEEUWENHOEK)

It is 1672. Pioneering microscopist, Antonie Phillips van Leeuwenhoek, plucks a dry moss tuft from the gutter, and within it, a zoo: the animalcule of drain dust. And before they knew it, they were at sea.

The tardigrade feels the antioxidants reknitting the dry damage in their DNA. Puff and pop, pop, pop, pop: leg-pairs. Then the snout is out and rooting the water for breakfast. The side legs wiggle-waddle the water. The caudal legs reach out for the substrate and latch thereon. Mouth machining the algae from the substrate, stylets pierce cells like ripe fruit.

Mountain of beak above. Dutch language waving the water. Crumbling peaks of chalk-soft humanity.

Grazing, the tardigrade notes light changes in its pigment-cup eyes. O don't get eaten by a eukaryote. Avoid the brown hydra, with its nematocyst harpoons. That eternal embryo my nemesis. Immortality becomes it. They can be minced and mixed and their cells will re-order. Perhaps, upon discovering the indestructible benefits of power naps, the tardigrades should not have deemed further evolution to be unseemly?

Ah, but what comes this way is no hydra.

Telescoping through aquaspace. Protective waxy cuticle better for being only semi-flexible. A sticky foot braking on substrate. Rotifera.

Rotifer: wheel bearer: total snack. Crown of cilia whip, whip vortex into the mouth-site. Sifting the soup for morsels: algae, phytoplankton, dead and decaying materials. Muck ground down in teeth of throat, to become again muck.

Once upon a time, some hundred million years ago, a rotifer went her own way. Upon seeing she was perfect, she dumped meiosis, became a well-spring, whelped a dynasty of clones. Pulse on in horizontal transfer these parthenogenic sisters, the freshwater Bdelloids, ancient asexuals, trading packets of genes like gossip.

And is there still rotifer for tea?
Does a water bear shit it its hoods?

Above the ringed horizon of the dish, though we cannot conceive it, the monstrous sun. An eyeball screwing, unscrewing, screwing again. God? God, no. Leeuwenhoek. We are Leeuwenhoek's pantheon. Leeuwenhoek is going on a bear hunt.

There is a tardigrade shedding.

And we eat and eat and grow and grown until the fit is tight. A pile of shite giving tug to the cuticle. To slough of the leathering hide and hidden inside, all those shits I never gave.

Here is a tardigrade breeding.

The seat of my skinsuit bunching over my caudle leg-pairs, with egg weight. I muddle the eggs in there, dreaming of lighter times. Until I moult a coat full of eggs and shit. A small male, with the attractive feature of being a small male, comes at it from a pore in front of the anus.

And when Leeuwenhoek is done and gone to tea, and the light of a further star shines into our arena, we dry out again.

We do not thrive in the face of adversity, we survive – dogged, clinging, dry – extinction events.

To feel the trehalose gather is peculiar. Sugar glassing up the living tissue. Glazing the membranes, the proteins. Wrapping the bubbles of water molecules tight, else they pop the cell with a puff of heat. Heaving in of leg pairs: one, two, three and, a little drier now – thunk, thunk – four. Squeaking back the face flesh into the neckhole. A little death now for future life. Avast!

PAUL VLITOS

Christmas (an excerpt from an unpublished novel)

Home. After five days at my parents' house, forty minutes in a traffic jam, four hours on the train, three hours on a rail replacement bus service and half an hour on the tube, I was finally home. Thank God. What a journey. All the way to the station my father kept asking me questions about Sally. How Sally's job was going, whether she was enjoying it, how we were both doing at the moment for money, that sort of thing. I think what he was really asking was whether everything was okay with us, with Sally and I. My answers were noncommittal. We were still stuck in traffic on Station Road as my train sailed past over the bridge.

The coffee shop was closed, the waiting room locked, the platform windswept and deserted. The ticket machine was broken. I had no signal on my phone. The next train was not due to arrive for forty-five minutes. It was late. It was packed. All the way to Didcot the man sitting opposite me was chewing gum with his mouth open, like a cow chewing cud. Shlop schlurp shlop schlurp. When I looked up from my book to glower at him he was picking his nose with his thumb.

Our eyes met. He kept picking. I looked away.

According to the radio in the car this had been the wettest December on record. Dad said he could believe it. All that rain. There were still great stretches of standing water in the fields past which the train was now rattling: enormous corner puddles, flooded ditches. Along the river in places the banks had vanished completely. We passed sheds that looked in danger of floating off downstream, swamped lines of sandbags, trees rooted in their own reflections. From the roof of their conservatory someone was flying the skull and crossbones.

Upon our arrival at Didcot Parkway it was announced that the train would be terminating here and those travelling to London should continue their journey by bus. As I was getting up to reach for my bag it became apparent where the man sitting opposite had been wiping his snot. There was a great thick yellow-green smear of it in a corner of the window.

I hate people, sometimes.

In the row directly behind me on the bus there was a woman filing her nails. Scritch scritch scritch. Scritch scritch scritch. The noise was not the worst of it, but the thought of all that nail-dust swirling about. If I had been able to turn around, if I had not been wedged in elbow to elbow with the person next to me, I would probably have said something. Instead, I angrily read the same paragraph of my book over and over for an hour then gave up, closed my eyes and spent another hour trying to force myself to fall asleep. Somewhere near the back of the bus a child was crying. They had all my sympathy.

There were roadworks on the A40, tailbacks on the M4. We were trundling through villages I had never even heard of. Hedgerley, Littlewick, Cockpole Green. I am pretty sure we were lost for a while. I dozed off for a moment and when I woke up we were attempting to reverse around a corner and onto a hump-back bridge and out of the path of an oncoming tractor. What woke me was the sound of our rear bumper scraping against the bridge's stone parapet, the wet branches of invisible trees slapping against the windows, the automated announcement that we were reversing. It was almost five and a half hours since I had left my parents' house.

I try to be patient. I try to be kind. The person sitting next to me now had their head on my shoulder, kept grumbling and grunting

to themselves in their sleep. I hope they were asleep, anyway. At one point they reached up and patted my arm into a more comfortable position. Like I was a cushion. Even if they were asleep, I resented this. Gently, gently, I kept trying to ease my neighbour upright. Each time I did so they would slump right back. Every so often they would awaken with a start, straighten up, apologise, look around them, start to drift off again – and the process would repeat. Every time I managed to nod off for a bit my head would loll and I would clonk myself awake on the window.

This was obviously not my day.

When we finally got to Paddington mine was literally the last bag out of the belly of the bus. For the last half hour of the journey I had been staring fixedly out of the window and thinking about nothing except how nice it would be get back to a warm flat and a hot bath.

The queue for the taxis was ridiculous. The battery on my phone was dead. The rain was clattering down on the roof of the station. Outside WH Smith a club-footed pigeon was tapping with its beak at an abandoned French fry. In the tickle at the back of my throat I could feel the start of a cold coming on. It was good to be back in London.

Everybody on the tube looked fucking miserable.

At Mile End I gave some money to the Big Issue guy, who insisted I took a copy of the magazine. The wind gusting up the Mile End Road set all the puddles shivering. I was still thinking about that bath. My flat, our flat, the flat that Sally and I used to share before she moved out, is a little ex-council one-bed, rented, in a block on St Stephen's Road – and when I say little, I am not joking. It is fucking tiny. The bath is just long enough to stretch your legs out in, if you happen to have really short legs. It could all

get a bit claustrophobic at times. The only place we could fit our wardrobe was in the living room. The only place you can put up an ironing board is in the hall. When you run the washing machine the whole flat rattles. The rent before bills is about fourteen hundred quid a month.

My name is David Gaskell and I am thirty-six years old.

The first thing I noticed when I got in through the front door was that the flat was freezing. Squatting in the kitchen to inspect the boiler I discovered the pilot light was out. Nor, after I had been through the reignition rigmarole three times, did it show any signs of sparking back into life. I let out a long deep sigh or groan. My bag was still on the counter in the kitchen, and I carried it through to the living room. If anything, the living room was even chillier than the kitchen. I could feel how cold the radiator was without taking my gloves off. What were the chances, I wondered, of getting someone out to look at a boiler this late, on a weekend, at this time of year? I suspected slim. When I tried the number on the inside of the boiler casing it went straight to answerphone. So did the next couple of numbers I tried, although eventually I did get through to a friendly-sounding chap in Bethnal Green who informed me the first they could get anyone out to me was Tuesday or Wednesday. Possibly Thursday.

'New Year, innit?' he observed.

I wished him a happy one, in advance. My voice was husky. Not in a sexy way. I was definitely going to get a cold. Of course I was. Every time I go down to the country to see my parents I come back with a cold. After weighing my options carefully I boiled the kettle, filled all the hot water bottles I could find, kicked my boots off, kept the rest of my clothes on, and crawled into bed. The sheets were icy. My cheek flinched from the pillow. I could feel the tip

of my nose going numb. My toes were like ice-cubes in my socks. Nevertheless I fell asleep almost immediately.

It had been a long day. It had been a long week.

I fucking hate Christmas.

It fell on a Tuesday, this year, the twenty-fifth. Since mid-November my mother had been asking me when it looked like I would be coming down, whether I would be around for drinks with the neighbours on Friday evening or carols on Saturday night, how many of us I thought there would be for Sunday lunch. Sophie and Rob would be driving down with Coco in the afternoon on the Friday.

'I'm sorry, Mum,' I said.

I was not really sorry. I did not really want to spend Friday evening making stiff seasonal small talk with my parents' neighbours or Saturday night tramping around the village in the rain singing Christmas songs at people's closed curtains or spend all Sunday morning peeling vegetables and making myself helpful around the house. I did not really want to have to go for a long family walk on Sunday afternoon in the mud and the cold and boots which didn't fit. I did not really want to have to take more baths than was avoidable in lukewarm water in an unheated bathroom with someone knocking on the door every five minutes to see if it's okay to run the hot tap in the kitchen. I did not really want to spend three hours in the Friday afternoon traffic with my sister and her husband and their five-year-old daughter and I really did not want to spend the whole weekend being asked where Sally was. I had a lunchtime meeting with my agent scheduled on the Monday; she was in town for the week. We had much to talk about. My intention was to catch the train down after that, get through Christmas Day itself without blow-ups or bickering, and then be out of there by

the following afternoon. I had already booked my return ticket, reserved a seat. I had arranged to meet a friend for dinner. I had things to do. They are fine, my family, in small doses. Forty-eight hours. That was the plan.

This is what happened.

The place my agent and I had arranged to meet for lunch was not far from King's Cross and I figured it would then be easy enough to get around to Paddington and hop on the two thirty train, arriving at my parents' station after a single change at five fifteen in the evening. Something I was firm about from the start was that I did not want Dad coming to pick me up. Mum and I had a long discussion about it. At the best of times it is twenty minutes each way, that journey. Five fifteen is right in the middle of the rush hour. It would be the day before Christmas. Everyone who wasn't dashing about doing last minute shopping would be trying to get home. Also, you can never get any reception in that neck of the woods. If the train was delayed or I somehow missed my connection, there would be no way of letting Dad know. He might be sitting in that car park for hours. Fuming. Fretting. Long story short: it would just be much easier and less stressful for everyone – myself included – if I just got a cab from the station. No, I did not need my mother to book me a cab. Yes, I knew Linscombe was not London and I could not count on there being a taxi waiting when I got off the train. I knew it was a very busy time of year.

She is a worrier, my mother. It can be exhausting.

On Monday morning my agent called to say she had accidentally double-booked herself and would it be possible to move our appointment forward an hour? I said no problem. Could we also meet somewhere a bit more central instead? I said sure. We were finished by one o'clock and by half one I was pulling out of

Paddington. On the train I caught up with some emails, watched the countryside roll by, jotted down some ideas in my notebook, snoozed a little, thought. I made my connection with time to grab a coffee and a paper. I was actually starting to feel quite Christmassy now. I texted the folks to let them know all was going according to schedule. I got a text back to say they were all sitting around by the fire with a glass of mulled wine.

I had forgotten to book the cab.

When I walked out of the station there were of course no taxis at the rank. It was Christmas Eve. We were in the country. The only other person who got off the train at the same time as me climbed at once into a waiting car and disappeared off up the lane. The blinds were down on the ticket window. The waiting room was shut. The nearest houses were a four-mile walk, on unlit pavementless roads. On a glass-fronted noticeboard on the platform was the number of the only local taxi service, Linscombe Cars. As anticipated, I had not a single bar of reception on my phone. It was cold. It was dark. It was wet.

By the time I reached my parents' front door, two hours later, I was pretty cold and wet too. My face felt like a rubbery mask. As I turned up the end of their road my phone finally managed to pick up some reception – I could hear it buzzing away to itself in my jacket pocket. I had twelve increasingly anxious texts and fifteen missed calls. I had ended up walking the whole bloody way. After hanging fruitlessly around the station for half an hour waiting for a cab or anybody to arrive, I had decided my best bet was to head up to the main road and see if I could find some reception or a bus stop or perhaps even a lift. Stupid idea. The only source of light I had with me was the torch on my phone. I was wearing white trainers. The mud in places was ankle deep. I kept getting walking face-first into

low-hanging branches, getting my bag snagged on them. I almost lost my balance entirely on at least three occasions, could feel my feet going out from under me or sliding off in different directions. Reaching out to steady myself on one of these occasions I found myself gripping firmly what on closer inspection turned out to be a rusty stretch of barbed wire. Having managed to disentangle my glove from the barbs and checked my hand itself in the torchlight to see whether I was going to need a tetanus shot, my next step took me straight into a foot-deep pothole full of icy brown water.

I reached the main road, finally. Still no reception. No sign of a bus stop, either. Or a pavement. Stumbling along the side of the road, one arm raised protectively in front of my face, muttering angrily to myself through numb lips, I began genuinely to wonder whether I was ever going to make it home. I would be one of those people you read about, found frozen in a ditch on Christmas morning. Or worse. Three or four cars passed. Some of them honked their horns. None of them stopped. After a couple of miles the verge disappeared entirely and I was forced to walk in the road itself. Every time I heard a car coming I had to drive myself back first into a hedgerow or step down gingerly into the nettle-choked ditch. As if to add insult to injury, I got passed twice by the same Linscombe Cars taxi. It looked liked they were having a busy night.

By the time I reached the outskirts of my parents' village, the rain had begun coming down in earnest. I was beyond caring now. At least it got some of the mud off. It was not like my feet or legs could get much colder or wetter. My jacket was scratched and torn. There was quite a sizeable chunk of hedgerow tangled up in my hair. I had been needing the loo for an hour. I had scratches and bruises and minor contusions all over my arms and legs and back. Every time I took a step my shoes squelched.

It was Sophie who opened my parents' front door. The first thing she told me was that Liz was coming.

It was ages since I had last seen my younger sister, Elizabeth. It was almost a year since we had spoken on the phone.

We had never been particularly close. There was the age difference between us, for one thing. I was eight when Lizzie was born; Sophie was ten. I had been hoping for a younger sibling I could boss and cuddle the same way Sophie had once bossed and cuddled me.

Liz was a nightmare from the start.

As a baby she was an eye-poker, a hair-puller, a yowling misery.

As a toddler she would throw terrible tantrums about absolutely nothing.

As a teenager Liz appeared at times to be going off the rails completely. Dad was always having to pick her up from places at two in the morning. A field, a bus shelter in the middle of nowhere, A and E. When I asked her at thirteen or fourteen what she and her friends did for fun together she told me that mostly they would sit around smoking roll-ups and drinking vodka and then the boys would all take it in turns to jump off things. Walls, haystacks, the roofs of barns. My parents used to worry about the kind of people my younger sister was hanging out with a lot. All through secondary school her attendance record was terrible. She did not turn up for half her GCSEs. The family line was that Liz had done very well in the exams she had taken, considering how little revising she had done.

Eight years had passed since then. For the last three or four of those years Liz had mostly been working overseas. I did used to email her, every birthday. When I had an address for her I tried to send a card. I also sent Liz a reminder when we were approaching

one of my parents' birthdays. Usually the response was to ask if I could organise some flowers. I don't think any of us had been expecting to see her this Christmas.

According to Sophie our sister was going to be on the 10 15 train in the morning and had already asked if someone collect her from the station.



VI. NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

ANSELL ABBOTT

A first-year student of Creative Writing and English Literature, Ansel Abbott has been borderline obsessed with fiction from a young age, especially fantasy, sci-fi, horror and anything which falls under the increasingly vague label of speculative. This is his first piece of published work.

MARYAM AHMED

I'm currently in my final year at Greenwich, studying Creative Writing. My passion has always been reading and writing and getting to study it at university has honestly been a dream come true. In my free time I love listening to music and going ice skating. Music always drives my motivation to write because I love to listen to the lyrics. I feel like listening to music goes hand in hand with writing and ice skating and just makes the experience of both that much more special.

YAZMIN BAILEY

Yazmin is a Speech and Language Therapy student who aspires to give a voice to those who have lost theirs. Through her writing,

which has been inspired by both her own experiences of loss and that of others, she also aspires to give a voice to fellow grievers as they try to navigate a new reality and make sense of their own complex feelings. 'The Dormant Daughter' is just one of her poems that captures the intensity of grief and the emotions it evokes.

MUSAMMAT BEGUM

Musammat Begum is a marketing and communications specialist with a passion for scriptwriting. With four years of experience in media, she won the School Award for Outstanding Achievement in Media and Communications 2021/22. Musammat holds a BA (Hons) Media and Communications as well as a MA Media and Creative Cultures from University of Greenwich. Known for her ambition, she is dedicated to elevating brands through infusing her storytelling skills and understanding of media dynamics. In addition to professional pursuits, Musammat enjoys digital art. A creative individual, Musammat seeks to bring a unique blend of creativity and strategic insight to every project.

DIANA BORDEI

Diana Bordei is a student in Psychology. Although not in her 20s anymore, but closer to her 40s, Diana decided a couple of years ago that life is about evolving and one can and should learn and study something new regardless of age. Psychology turned out to be the most interesting subject for her, and she's been enjoying this challenge and journey every step of the way. Writing poems has been a passion for her since she was younger, but it's something she does on and off. One of her favourite poems is 'If' by Rudyard Kipling. Even though it was written quite a while back, it's still accurate and relevant. It's a good life lesson.

SUSANNA GASPARINI BOUDJEMAA

Susanna has a BA in Creative Writing and is currently studying for her Masters. She was born in Italy and moved to the UK as a teenager. After a life spent raising her three children, she decided to enrol at university as a mature student and pursue her dream of becoming a writer. She enjoys writing short stories with a twist of mystery, as well as crime fiction novels and screenplays. She has also written opinion pieces and reviews for a local magazine. She has recently started composing poems and attends various poetry events. Susanna loves travelling and writing about her own experiences.

RACHEL BROWN

Rachel Brown grew up in a small seaside town in Lancashire. She studied English at the University of Leeds before spending the rest of her twenties working in publishing in Bradford, London and the Caribbean. Following a career change, she currently helps students create ideas for start-ups at the University of Greenwich, where she is also completing an MA in Creative Writing. She's currently writing her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, which explores the triggers that can throw lives, love and friendships off course. *Shadow Dance* was longlisted in the Women's Prize 2022 Discoveries competition and shortlisted in the Indie Novella 2023 prize.

SILVIE SINEAD COX

Silvie Sinead Cox is a 20-year-old BA Creative Writing student from Kent. Previously published in the 2022 Greenwich Anthology, her interests have recently shifted into experimental prose and poetry – or better, prose poetry – and utilising both as outlets to express and decipher emotions that she cannot understand. She writes in hopes of achieving closure, while also providing comfort

to those in similar situations. Inspiration mainly sparks during her commutes, and from the emotions evoked by the music she enjoys. Outside of academia, Silvie is currently working on her first novel.

HAFAH HAREEM FAROOQI

Hafsah Hareem Farooqi is a 20-year-old girl who tries her best to be an individual. She is not afraid of trying to be herself no matter what others say. This girl might find it hard to be popular but she is trying to make an impact in her own way by being herself. When she is herself, this girl is happiest and shines like a star. This girl will always try to be a trendsetter instead of a crowd follower. She has found her way in her second year at Greenwich University studying Early Years by being herself.

SHANIYA FOFANAH-FORDE

Shaniya Fofanah-Forde hopes to become a therapist and has a strong interest in her studies of psychology and counselling. She wrote a gripping memoir called *Clip My Wings* under the pen name April Williams. In addition to her academic pursuits, Shaniya enjoys creating art, writing, and pottery to express her varied interests and talents. Shaniya is paving her way to a happy future with her creative spirit and strong commitment to mental health.

JAMIE FOLTAK

Jamie Foltak is a 21-year-old lesbian, nonbinary student who turns to poetry and prose to express the emotions constantly running rampant in their mind. He also chooses to tell stories from the heart of sapphic and for sapphic people, not wanting them to be a rarity in bookshops. When not writing, Jamie can be found reading a high fantasy book (for the gossip) or filming bookish content.

SIMON HARDEMAN

Simon Hardeman is a writer, comedian, and musician. He has written for or appeared on the BBC, ITV, Channel 5, Sky, *The Times*, *The Independent*, *the i*, and many more. He co-wrote and played the lead in the comedy podcast 'Hancock's Half House', the play *Death of a Comedian*, and currently co-writes the Beginners' Guides, which began in *The Times* and are now on Substack. He writes songs and has released several albums, most recently *Nights Under the Moon*. At Greenwich he teaches journalism and creative writing.

SAM JORDISON

Sam Jordison is a publisher, author, and journalist. He is the co-director of the award-winning independent publisher, Galley Beggar Press. He has written many articles for the *Guardian* and other national newspapers. He has also written several works of non-fiction including the best-selling *Crap Towns* series and *Enemies of the People*, and *Literary London*, a book about literary culture in the UK capital he co-authored with Eloise Millar.

GEORGIA KATELANOU

Georgia Katelanou, 20, embraces a dual life as a History and Politics scholar at the University of Greenwich and a charismatic bartender. Hailing from Athens, her days oscillate between academic rigor and the rhythmic dance of cocktail shakers. Beyond books and bars, Georgia's soul finds expression in the lyrical strokes of poetry and the captivating frames of photography. Her lens captures the world's nuances, while verses breathe life into her experiences. A storyteller both in words and spirits, Georgia's story unfolds as a vibrant tapestry, woven with the threads of academia, mixology, poetry, and the timeless artistry of visual storytelling.

SOPHIE LLOYD

Sophie Lloyd discovered her passion for writing back in the 2020 lockdown. When the whole world was baking banana bread, she was kneading doughy poems and now hopes to watch her skills rise in the oven of university. She is a yoga teacher with a background in dance, so a lot of her inspiration comes from the body and the ever-altering human experience. Sophie is exploring a spectrum of mediums to find her niche and voice as a writer. She hopes one day to publish a novel.

MEGHAN CASEY LOUGHRAN

Meghan Casey Loughran is a poet and playwright from a working-class Irish-Geordie background. She is interested in finding the poetry in the legacy of the Troubles, the 'peace process' and the colonisation predating the civil war in the north of Ireland. Her most recent work is a collection of poems reflecting on her life growing up in Ireland, her own Irish republican identity, class politics, religion, and feminism.

TOBY MILLIS

Toby Millis (the legend) is a second year English Literature and Creative Writing student, who writes about a varied range of topics often political, religious, or relating to mental health. Toby sometimes experiments with form and showcases it in this anthology, following a stint at being published in the anthology a year before.

JOSEPH O'SULLIVAN

Joseph O'Sullivan is a London native of Irish and Japanese upbringing. Raised on tales of Eire and her heroes like Brian Boru or Sir

Arthur Wellesley, he is someone whose work is also steeped in the pretensions of men like H.P Lovecraft and Cedric Bixler-Zavala, and owes a debt to Bixler-Zavala's honest yet avant-garde writing style, whose influence is felt all across Joseph's work.

JOSH H PHELPS

Josh H Phelps is a writer, musician and postgraduate student from the edge of south-east London, currently studying MA Creative Writing. He has previously been published in *The London Magazine's* 'Young Writers Archives', and the *University of Greenwich Anthology 2023*. Josh's writing, like himself, is grounded in suburbia, exploring the multi-faceted concept of 'suburban purgatory' and the complexity of modern living intersecting with morality. He is also a blues rock guitarist, currently working on a collection of demos called *Escape from Sidcup*, and is interested in combining the blues with other genres of music, such as glam rock, punk and new wave.

DESANTILA QERIMAJ RRANXA

Desantila Qerimaj Rranxa was born in Shkoder, Albania, in 1980. She studied music and cello for twelve years in her native country and continued cello studies in Conservatorio Cesare Pollini, Padova, Italy. For many years she played in symphonic and philharmonic orchestras in Albania, Italy and lastly in London. During all this time she never lost her passion for books especially poetry, taking part in different poetry competitions in her country. In 2016 she was a co-editor to the short prose book *Fryma* published in Albania. Then, in 2019 she published her first book of poetry in Albanian. She's lived in London since 2011.

FREDDIE ROLLS

Freddie Rolls is a second-year Creative Writing student who developed a passion for screenwriting as an early teen after gaining access to the Final Draft screenwriting software. He has spent a dangerous proportion of his spare time since playing with the software; first indulging his love of sci-fi with an eight-episode series about a mysterious race of gods living at the edge of the universe. Closer to home, he has written a ten-episode sitcom about four schoolteachers and a pilot script for a series all about humanity's last year of existence before Earth is destroyed by a comet! In case it wasn't obvious, he'd love to write for television.

MONDAY-MALACHI ROSENFELD

Monday-Malachi Rosenfeld is a first-year BA (Hons) Politics and International Relations student who is passionate about exploring culture and social issues through their writing. As a queer autistic Jew from a town where they didn't feel they could belong, they want to share their view of the world in the best way they know how and encourage others to pick up a pen and get writing too. When they're not working towards a career in journalism, Monday can be found fawning over their cat Angelica or playing Animal Crossing.

MARIA SAFANPO

Maria Safanpo is a medical graduate and a second-year Creative Writing student at the University of Greenwich. She was born and raised in Indonesia and is currently pursuing her dream of being a writer. She enjoys reading and writing stories. Her favourite genres, to write or read, are Slice of Life and Historical Fiction. From a young age, she tended to write her feelings in her personal journal, which made her start to love writing. She does not have

any technique to write poems, instead usually following the flow of her heart, so every work is written in free verse.

JADA SCOTT

Jada Scott is an MA Student in Creative Writing. She has a BA in Creative Writing from the University of Essex and is a writer and poet. She writes prose, poetry and screenplays and her writing usually contains themes such as mental health, feminism, and race. Jada's favourite genre to write is contemporary fiction and her favourite genres to read are fantasy and romance. She spends her free time reading and on social media and hopes to finish writing a novel soon if she can stop reading other people's novels instead.

ADAM SKIPPER

When Adam isn't working in a dark basement, beneath a not-so-secret publishing society, he spends most of his time writing novels, short stories and losing himself in other people's stories.

CHERRY SMYTH

Cherry Smyth is an Irish writer, living in London. She has published four poetry collections and one novel. *If the River is Hidden*, co-authored with Craig Jordan-Baker, Epoque Press, 2022, is a poetry-prose collaboration that is touring currently as a performance with music. Cherry was elected a Fellow for the Royal Society of Literature in 2022. She is Associate Professor in Creative & Critical Writing at the University of Greenwich.

ROSIE ŠNAJDR

Rosie Šnajdr is an author of experimental fiction, including *Whorl the Prudent Slipt* (Veer, 2021), *A Hypocritical Reader* (Dostoyevsky

Wannabe, 2018), and the chapbook *We Are Cosmonauts* (Hesterglock and Aleph Press, 2019). She co-edits the *Cambridge Literary Review* and teaches Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich.

JUSTIN SOLLY

Justin Solly lives in the picturesque civil parish of Leigh-on-Sea, alone but for his proverbial forest of house plants (which are mostly dying). Justin alternates his time between his writing (and procrastination) room – which lays nestled underneath a sky light, working at the local tavern, and lifting heavy circles at the gym. Justin is working on his first novel, inspired by a fairy he spoke to once at the bottom of his garden, who was kind enough to tell him their story. Justin's favourite season is autumn – the part when the leaves are crisp and crunchy and it's nice-to-get-warm-cold.

JON SUTCLIFFE

Jon Sutcliffe is an English poet and songwriter from the edge of London, Crayford, in the southeast. He is now a mature student at 35, who has featured in a few anthologies and occasional performance poetry on BBC radio Kent, as well as publishing a collection *Dust; Poems and songs*, and a single *Masquerade*. Jon is currently studying at the University of Greenwich in a Creative Writing undergraduate course, and working towards further publishing opportunities, and new horizons to document in poetry and song. A reclusive type of artist, with no need for more than a pad and pen, some gin and smokes and a guitar.

GEORGE THOMPSON

George Thompson is a 22-year-old writer, student, teacher, visionary, and dream weaver. He loves cycling around London on his bike soaking up ideas for his silly little stories. Moreso, he loves

hanging out with his lovely partner and their toothless, 20-year-old cat Maggie, sipping on some delicious coffee and writing. His speciality is ergodic literature with a lean towards exploring mental health mostly through horror or slightly sad fantasy.

ELOISE J TUSON

Eloise J Tuson is an 18-year-old from Essex and is currently in her first year studying Creative Writing and English Literature in Greenwich. From an early age, she enjoyed reading and then also began enjoying writing when she wrote her own version of *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* by Judith Kerr. Since then, she has found an interest in poetry, after studying Carol Anne Duffy's *The World's Wife* and Christina Rossetti. She likes to write narrative poetry with a focus on ASD and anxiety, often drawing from her personal experiences with the hope to bring more awareness to neurodiverse voices.

NORA VESELAJ

Nora Veselaj is a first year Creative Writing and English Literature student with a passion for writing, wanting a future career in the publishing industry. She is making a name for herself as a freelance author and is currently using her six years of experience as a writer to write a script for a web-series called *Blacklight*, exploring social media in relation to a group of controversial youth celebrities, for which she is also making all the art for with her digital art experience. She also has a keen interest in studying and reading cyberpunk literature, with her favourite book of all time being *Neuromancer*.

PAUL VLITOS

Paul Vlitos is Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. He is the author of two novels as himself: *Welcome to*

the Working Week (Orion, 2007) and *Every Day is Like Sunday* (2008). Writing as 'Ellery Lloyd' (with his wife Collette Lyons) he is the author of three novels: *People Like Her* (UK Mantle, US Harper Collins 2021), the New York Times bestseller and Reese's Book Club pick *The Club* (UK Mantle, US Harper Collins 2021), and *The Final Act of Juliette Willoughby* (UK Pan Macmillan, US Harper Collins, June 2024). He is delighted to be able to contribute to this anthology the opening chapters of his currently unpublished third novel *Nervous People*, a comedy of family life which is also an attempt to survey the aftermath of Brexit through the eyes of a washed-up puppeteer.

KAVIL WAGH

Kavil Wagh loves to read and talk about books. He is fairly organized and follows a proper routine in which he meditates, writes and works out regularly. Kavil reads a lot of science fiction and self-help books have made a large impact on him. He uploads all of his experiences on his Instagram and YouTube channel by the name of 'Kavil Writes' – look him up to know more.

HOLLIE WILSON

Hollie Wilson is a 20-year-old writer who grew up in Essex. She moved to Greenwich to study Creative Writing and is in her third year at the university. She has always had a love for fiction, ever since she read Enid Blyton's *The Enchanted Wood* as a child, and her passion for poetry arose when she encountered Sylvia Plath's work on Tumblr. Hollie mostly writes prose poetry but is currently working on her first novel – *Growing Pains* – which is a coming-of-age story about navigating the stormy waters of adolescence, and how DNA doesn't make a family.

CHARLOTTE WOOD

Charlotte Wood is a Creative Writing student from Essex who jumps at the opportunity to write whenever she can. From scraps of poetry in her notes app to whole stories jotted down in notepads, Charlotte is always writing something or other. She hopes to one day be a journalist and published author. In her spare time, she submits pieces to various Instagram magazines and blogs. A favourite style of writing for Charlotte as an avid concert goer is music reviews which she hopes to incorporate into her future career.

ADELA XHEZA

Adela Xheza is a first year English Literature student who's writing poetry constantly, with a heavy inspiration coming from mythology, her own practice and beliefs as a pagan witch, and a love for expressing the feminine urge to run far into the wilderness and never return. Finding a way to make the ephemeral concrete and to share her experiences and emotions is why she writes, why she reads and why she has fallen in love with poetry. She is still in shock that she has managed to achieve one of her lifelong dreams of becoming a published poet due to this anthology.

JASMINA ZIMOCH

Jasmina Zimoch is a Polish student of Creative Writing. Her love for literature, writing and cinema began with her mother introducing her to the works of Tolkien, James and Tarantino from a young age. She moved to England at the age of 19 to study film at Oxford Brookes University and then transferred to the University of Greenwich to study writing. Her lifelong dream is to publish her own novel, her favourite genres are gothic horror, fantasy, historical fiction and folklore.

