

ANTHOLOGY

2022

Creative writing from
the University of Greenwich

edited by

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I. INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the 2022 Greenwich Anthology – another year in which our students have shown their ability to produce wonderful work, no matter what the world throws at them,

One student on this year's Contemporary Publishing course remarked that it's been another year, another set of variants, another set of challenges external and internal – but in spite of that we've also managed to create another anthology. We've put together the work of Greenwich students from around the world and we're proud of what they've achieved. There's a huge variety of poetry and prose on display here – and many different talents.

Like last year, the team working on this anthology have not always been able to be in the same room as each other. They've worked remotely – but have found ways of making connections. Our team had to find new ways of reaching out to people, using electronic and online resources as well as more traditional campus-based poster campaigns. The large number of submissions they've gathered and subsequently edited shows how well they have succeeded. The students have also edited those pieces and worked closely with the many authors in this book to help them realise their vision. They have made the editorial decisions in this book, as well as putting in the work necessary to bring each poem, prose piece and script to completion.

We hope now that you will enjoy reading these creative pieces. They provide another fascinating snapshot of student life in the twenty-first century, as well as an indication of where many of these young writers are heading and want to be. We're delighted to be able to present such a full and vital anthology of stories, poetry and scripts and we're grateful to you for reading. We hope you enjoy it!

II. POEMS



J. SHARON ADEKOYA

Taciturn

Some days, I just want to hear you
I don't want to speak or ramble
I mean, I always want to, but I want it to be you
Doing all the speaking and reading what my heart says
Because I don't have the words
Or simply cannot bear to say them aloud.

See, these days, I don't want to hear you
So I fill up the silence with my monologue
Carefully reconstructing former lines
And serving them to you again
Hoping you do not notice that really,
I have nothing and everything to say.

Still, maybe one day, I would actually hear you
Sitting attentively and patiently with you
No leaping in or nervous jitters,
No emotion or desire that's bitter
Just me, heart open, mind receiving
Listening to the beautiful speech you are giving
Perhaps, the one I was constantly dreading.

SINEA ALVIS

Wahgwan

Why you killing your brothers?
Violating your sisters?
In a world like today,
Where you can get paid
For shit like, watching video games.
You'd rather be on the block,
Licking shots;
Carrying that shank, bunin' that dank,
To look and act like you're bad
Or to shield from those that do.
Wahgwan for you?

Getting vex & wanna flex,
Coz next man's got better crep
Or you're just doing it for the rep;
So dem man, don't think you're wet.
Meanwhile, these motherfuckers are out here,
kneeling on OUR fucking necks!
Treating us with, no respect.
But you'd rather be in the trap,
Practising to back-strap,
hyping with a bottle of yack.
Wahgwan for you?

Identity Theft

History books tell all we stem from chains.
Wearing our scars like skin, we march through
Every family tree stamped with white names,
Our pixie dust touch on all we do.
We've been twerking from nineteen-eighty but
My girl, Miley Cyrus, did set the ting.
We've been box-braiding from wed-day, hmm but
Somehow that hairstyle belongs to Miss Kim.
Dixy shops. Our songs. In the background
Of almost all the things deemed 'cool'.
Labelled us urban, and then claimed it all.
Stole us, sealed us and sold us for pound;
Removing and replacing the black face!
We are not bitter and we do not moan.
Hidden greatness, our making supreme,
Naturally setting new and fresh tones.
Universal lighting – Red, gold and green,
Coz identity is more than just race!

ZOË BARRY

Bow

I bow my crown and apologise
to the wolf with the psychotic glare.
He hunts for blood, but my cowering subsides his salivating fangs
for another night or so in this mossy nightmare...

Equilibrium

Equilibrium
Sunk I am
 but not sinking
Held
My trapeze net of hopeful threads
 Earth Wind Water and Fire scattered on the star dust below
Moon Sun Sea and Universe
 cupping my head back legs feet
 as my motionless face faces up
 my eyes are closed for I trust
 the corners of my mouth are upturned as I
have faith
 My forehead unfurrowed
 My cheeks rosy not red
 My fists unclenched
 no crescents carved into the map of my
palms as my surrounding implodes
Resting in the equilibrium of His power.

You stare for so long at that first little step, but ice halts your feet,
for you fear to accept—
Accept the grand case as belonging to you, but the wings whisper
softly from upon the mantel
'The waves may never dry, never leave, never unhook, but this
staircase is yours to climb if you just move one foot
so although the chilled waters seem a terrible threat, and you feel
you owe an unpayable debt,
you can step that first step, and if ever you feel grim,
do not fear the ocean, for we'll teach you how to swim.'

ROBERT BOBEICA

Soot

It latches on and lingers. The murky substance has now inundated
my system and begins to feed.

It rushes in. Slices past. Cuts through.

Yet still, not as viciously as you.

As it travels, I ease myself into the chair and wait for the high.
Rushing through the vena cava, barging in through the right atrium.
Into the right ventricle.

It pumps its viscous matter into my lungs. It expands and reaches
and latches on.

And then it lingers.

I feel my chest rising in intermittent bouts. Can't take too much at
once. Yet starving for more.

I'm not doing this for you.

The soot flings itself back into my heart with thorny aggression, as
I finally feel my neck giving in and my head flopping backwards on
the headrest.

The left atrium. The left ventricle. Aorta.

The soot engulfs me and I'm swallowed whole.

My body aches with pulsating blackness.

It's warm.

It's thick.

It's mine.

You said it's your blood that I bleed. So, I replaced it.

I try to move my legs but the soot commands obedience. I succumb. A tingling sensation takes over my body, preceding the nothingness that quickly takes its stead. The white textured ceiling is darkening at the edges, as your cries beyond the locked door become muffled. I close my eyes and feel my lips curl into a smirk.

I'm free from your disease.

Just An Itch

It's just an itch.

Burrowed underneath my fingernails,
shivering and crawling, it sinks itself in deeper.

Scratch it.

A shy tingle in my teeth, just an itch.

Scratch it.

It lurks in my eyes. Just an itch,
it's just an itch, it's just an itch,
gnawing at my eyes with sharp teeth,
it's just an itch.

Scratch it. Please.

J. ALEXANDER BURGIN

The Visitor

A Canon shot the baboon from his baobab tree,
the dream vanishing with his slumber.

A monkey captured by men,
captured by pixels.

#ironic

In comforting disgust, you gape at lions,
tearing apart a pig.

Newborns swallowed by snakes,
digested fish in hungry beaks.

Simple beasts
displaying our cruel urges.

Who could blame us,
not knowing murder
pairs best with a dry Riesling.

The wind turns and ruffles furs
and fur coats
and sends shivers down the spines
of those who have them.

In winter we stick together, central heating
Amateurs! you think,
burning the world and
enslaving your own.

You learned to speak. Still,
remorse is nothing but a word.

What a shit life, being born in a cage.
A cheetah, happy with feet
when she could have miles.
But the only thing worse
than a prisoner who thinks herself free
is one who thinks she is the visitor.

Maniac

His thoughts shoot from his brain into his pen
the ink the link he missed from life divine
the Lord above seems weak to sleepless men
no day for rest, the world is on the line!

His snout detects all of the deadly snow
but this hound gives no howl, he snorts it all
don't stop the dance, a smile will make the show
a heart attack alone will make him fall.

His bed is always warm on nights he craves
a man or girl but none could quench his thirst
and if they stay there's few that he can save
the hole inside that pulls them till they burst.

And now it's gone, the high of minds so few
back into the abyss, the cycle starts anew.

Blood-red Royalty

in autumn, Maple is vanity
her evening gown, fire-kissed silk.
look at her, swaying in the wind—
the fairest of them all.

envy cloaks her naked shame in winter
loathing the firs in their handsome jackets
I am cold, so cold, she cries;
an empress with no clothes

time for the tailor, he brings his spring collection
tiny brooches to adorn her slender limbs,
little rubies on her branches
to bring the bees, her handmaids, in

no bathing suit, summer is for modesty,
protecting herself from the heat
and lending you her parasol,
her ever-generous Majesty.

SARA LUJE CASA

Father

I never needed you until I did.

I never wanted you close, but I died for having you near me.

I never thought I was enough for you,

I always thought there might be something wrong with me.

I don't need you, but I do.

I don't want you close to me because you don't want me close to
you.

Understanding you has been my major enigma.

An enigma I need to resolve, an enigma that for many years I
thought the only solution was blaming myself.

I have many things to say, many things I want to scream out of me,
and many to reclaim.

I've been hurt for many years; I am still hurt.

I have wounds that seem never to heal.

I have times when I do things I never thought I was capable of.

My body responds in ways I don't feel proud of.

My mind plays tricks on me, voices in my head scream that I am
not enough, that I will never be.

Voices that are your creation and my torture, an avoidable part of
me.

I am lost sometimes, most of the time.

I am tired of trying but I can't give up.

I want to heal but your memory appears always saying that I am not
enough.

I hate you but I can't hate you.

I want to understand you, but you never bother about being
understood.

You don't care, you never did.

I am tired of losing myself when I think about you, but I can't take
you out of me.

You still have the power over me, the power of making my day
miserable.

The power that once I gave you, but you never gave it back; the
power over my decisions.

My decisions are all printed by the wounds you left, wounds that
reopen again and again.

I am exhausted of feeling this way because of you, but I can forgive
you, you never said sorry, or at least you never mean it.

I am moving on; I am trying to accept the fact you were never there
and that you are not here and you will never be.

I am looking upon my future.

A future where you have no more power.

A future where I break the chains you put on me.

A future where I get something I deserve, something better than
what you taught me I was worthy of.

A future where I don't blame myself anymore, and I start loving
myself.

A future without your memory.

A future without you.

MELEK CELLA

Artists

Creators of this humanity seem to me to be the creative ones.

It is made easy when it isn't.

Songs are sung in a few words, when in fact it took year or two to breathe life to it.

Stories are read in few weeks, when in fact it took decades to create memorable ones.

Poems are read in seconds, by the time they touch one's lip they find the end but in fact it takes sleepless nights to find words to satisfy ears.

Paintings... It's heart-warming and heart-breaking when in fact it takes a lifetime to bring life canvas.

In fact, it can take a lifetime in what we endure and let people in. Humanity relies on our entertainment to lift us up or help grieve. Without entertainers where would we be?

The Love That's Found in The Forest

He's small and
thinks himself ugly
Low self-esteem because
no one will marry him
Although his name is Happy
he's unhappy and depressed
Until a beautiful and kind woman came into the forest
hello wake up
His heart is brimming
over with love
Because his love is returned
she loves him back
It is this
The stunted dwarf
who is the women's knight in shining armour?
Not the handsome prince
Because
it is the little dwarf
who saves her
from the witch by switching the apples
She forsakes the castle and money
for the love and happiness in the forest.

RUBY DUONG

Modern Fantasy

I see you... I want you
My heart longs for...
The holding of hands, your touch sends shivers down my spine...
The smell of your scent, is it natural? Or your aftershave?
The feel of your cheek on mine

The tingle in my stomach every time I see your face
I know your existence, but you don't know mine
I watch you – as you walk, talk... everything intrigues me
You are on my mind, every day, every second, every hour...

I dreamt of you and I together,
The fantasy of us being one – holding hands, kissing, cuddling –
The thought of you being mine and my forever after...
Going on dates to the movies, restaurants for dinner, pubs for
drinks, ice skating...

Dreaming of us being together, the future...
You as my boyfriend, I as your girlfriend, we move in together
Your proposal... our wedding... Me looking beautiful in white...
You in black at the aisle waiting for me... our family and friends
gathered to witness –
Our marriage and announce we are husband and wife, our moment
forever cherished

My heart skips a beat when I successfully find you on Instagram
Staring at your photos, intrigued at how we would look together as
a couple

What our families would look like, potential children in the future –

You are always on my mind... forever in my heart

One day you will be mine... one day...



SIHAM DUNCAN

Ferocity

Though 'violence isn't the answer',
Should you instead lie down for the wicked?
Take over what's yours like a cancer,
Leaving you loathsome and crooked.

Malevolence conquers whilst the good are dismissed,
Descending into the dark abyss.
Searching for answers, becoming numb not attuned.
But the true view of mankind, you'll grasp very soon.

Puzzles

How can you look at the world and not feel awed?
And who do you turn to if you don't believe in God?
Striving for someone to see you and to applaud,
But success is a façade within a system so flawed.
Whereby police function to roam, raid and maraud,
And the colour of your skin determines if you're outlawed.

Where do I fit in? I don't know where to start.
A young, black, Muslim woman who's a feminist; I hit it out of the park.
So, you see, I don't fit in a marginalised chart.
Nowadays I look around and it seems people no longer have a heart,
Between the genuine and malicious, you can't even tell them apart.
More plastic and fewer ways to remind yourself that you're a work
of art.
Their opinions of you, by force they must impart,
Ends up destroying someone so much that they depart.

So I restart, how can you look at the world and not feel awed,
And who do you turn to if you don't believe in God?

SAM GILBERT

Used to hate the word 'bittersweet'

Used to hate the word 'bittersweet',

it drove me mental with its indecision.

Nonsensical hypocrite, eleven bastard letters, carbonating ideas
filling throats, condescending senses, making sense.

An innocent tart, all honey spiked with garlic, a mercenary with no
fee to soak up rain in the dry.

Pries open without exposing, an idiotic coked-up slur from a critic
in the pocket of millionaires, a barrister that defends a genocide,
the rape of a child in a sitcom.

A bonanza to commemorate the conclusion of all existence, a crime
of passion riddled with cancer of the tongue.

Call someone from a well, expect them to fall in with you, caught
together, right?

Instead, turn your heels, cup your mouth, make a nice, fat 'You're
on your own'.

No small thing, not a thing at all, oxymoronic mushroom-cloud,
asphyxiating ecstasy.

Thing is we'd had a fight, stepped outside for fresh air,
took a whiff...

It's sort of kind
to be cruel.

A Sestina For Grandma

A froth-cape spidering fruitfully, it billows
from distanced historical chimneys, timed grimace
of the shoreline, the wad-thick omniscient nape
that runs triumphant, dousing passengers in sleep.
Moans crooked, misery sandwiches congregate
and flee lighted as the sand-dunes soon hit the waves.

The tropics are portrayed still (long-windedly), waves
rumble-shuffle sideways, crabs wander and billow
out from cornered night-time. Diaries congregate
to lodge forth mumbled complaints; one split-spread grimace
concerning mournfully and crisp-powdered – her sleep.
Call them foul-mouthed excuses to sweat down our napes.

And just how polluted must be these once-fresh napes!
Sugar within these walls that keep you from pink waves
of justice, eagerly awaiting nourished sleep!
Such that dreams of plumbing will have these sheep billow
and blurt, consider regrets, left purple, grimace.
Darken rainbow corridors. Never congregate.

Can we have elderly male nuns congregate
beneath the Pacific? Carry a scruffy nape
towards a rose-curtained, porcelain yet cracked grimace
that shadows and shudders like one true neon wave?
Cast an end-line into the flowery billow,
rush electric yellow? Sweet metaphors for sleep!

Lain white, unromantic, she vouches for some sleep,
so, her meddlesome upbringing paints 'CONGREGATE
THOUGHTS, ALL' on flesh pillows, bed-side ash-tray billows
to Christian side as vinyl winds 'round the nape
of the grey noose, coarse. Limp. Adrenaline in waves
pound through human parts with limits in grimaces.

Subject's forecast display played out in a grimace,
confining singularly some colour in sleep.
You'd be only too amazed at the shapes; the waves
of a woman's folly, jolly to congregate
characters antiqued, neatly collected. The nape
of her neck jolted, transfused, a brain that billowed.

The troubled bosom came in waves, made me grimace!
For what billowed leapt behind and dragged on in sleep
disguised only to congregate a picturesque nape.

I Sell Computers

Do you want it in gold of course we can set you up for that that for
you upset SIT DOWN upsell sell you it silly
I sell computers

I'm not qualified for that quantified quality of inequality quell a
qualm quench a query oh yes dearie how queer that you're here
it's clear
I sell computers

Enriching lives inside a computer that costs a year not rich nor
enriched but again switched from itch to glitch I twitch
I sell computers

Stand at door ignored look across floor eyesores with quad-cores
deplored expensive vessels sworn for porn I'm torn
I sell computers

Eye contact intact there's an app for that in fact demonstrate fate
better in solid state occupy wi-fi lies try rinse dry leave teeth blue
along with minds and eyes can't cry
I sell computers

LUCAS GOMES

Forgotten Friend

Infectious thoughts poisoning the stream,
Into the bag, they will go.
Unfair emotions killing my innocence,
Into the bag, they will go.
Let it be so dense, so dark,
Turning it into a black hole,
A place to end my soul's woe,
A place where the simple absence of everything is glee,
A place of no return that can set my mind free.

Weight on my back,
Ran and fell to a crack,
Wind punching...
Water kicking...
Earth and blood united.

I withdraw my shield so that I can move,
I take off my helmet so that I can see,
I remove my armour so that I can feel,
I look forward to a trail, a goal,
A path of bliss.

Feeling life over my skin,
With the rhythms of nature speaking to my soul,
And as I acknowledge your transparent beauty,
I drop the bag.

You let its dirt flow with the river,
Purifying and incorporating it into the world's soil,
Creating lusciously succulent fruits,
Which within their pulp, the cure to this putrid fever.

Your angst is just,
Misjudged for your ferocious acts,
Mistreated by those you touch,
Your actions cause pain,
But you only speak the truth.

Honest friend,
Ruthless passion,
I thank you for your pure and crystal touch,
The proof of my existence.

TAHLIA GREEN

What Does It Mean To Be A Woman

Is it the physical body I possess,
With its curves and boundaries
Smooth skin, clumps of cells deemed attractive, defining who I am,
Defining my gender,
Defining my worth.

Is it the things I adore?
Conditioned to draw to pink, pull to purple
Sing sweetly, learn in silence
Watch romantic comedies that teach me how to fall in love.

Is it the injustice I still face?
Trying to clamour out of degrading remarks, break out of the mould
Without being scolded.
Does being a woman mean I have to pinch at my skin and compare
myself to others?
Does being a woman mean I'll have to face my reflection in a glass
ceiling and simply smile politely?
I want a right to my voice, not just a vote or stupid anecdote.

But despite all this,
To be a woman is to be powerful,
To live for one's self
To take society's expectations and mould them to suit ourselves

To be a woman is to be clever, compassionate and courageous
To wear and do as she pleases



It's like living in an energetic state
Where you flow through the universe,
Slip through the cracks of time
Go to heaven, hell and back
All in one day
And get back in time to dance in front of the mirror.
That's what it means to be a woman.



BETHANY HOWELL

The Woes Of Life

Today I sat and wondered
My heart racing
Thoughts flowing fast and freely
Thoughts eating me up inside

Yesterday I sat and pondered
My temperature rising
My body crippled with fear
My body aching

Last week I sat and imagined
My chest getting tighter
Breathing faster
My life feeling like it's over

Tomorrow I will sit and think
My life full of laughter
My heart full of love
My body full of promise

My future is bright
For now, is darker
But tomorrow, I'll see light

BEATA GRISKEVIC

I Am A Human From The Planet Earth

I wake up
in the centre of Asia
at one of the Stans
and in the same day
I fall asleep in Europe
under the same stars

I see the moon
the one and only
which helps me realise
this magic bridge connects us all
I go from Europe to Asia in 10 mins

I am in a city where people believe
they rename their gods
they rebuild their temples
and still drink the same tea

I am in the city where the law was born in the 6th century
and we still follow them
we are only humans on the same planet earth
we create borders and build the walls
and at the same time
we build bridges to reach each other

We are all humans from the planet Earth...

OLAITAN HUMBLE

Elegy

I remember. I remember how the simple thought of
father's death became cancer cells growing in my brain.

Father forbade elegies. So when father died, the house
fast became a colony of mutes. After my quinquennial

silence, I crossed the Rubicon. I knew exactly what I
was doing but what did I care? Funeral flowers collap-

sing in my mouth. First, I heigh-hoed to father's grave
in the black thobe he wore on the day he died. Heigh-

ho! Heigh-ho! Heigh-ho! What better way to challenge
the angel of death to a fashion contest. A duel lurking

in my head since the moment father was wrapped in
cheap garments & laid to sleep six feet deep as if to say:

Ye, son of Adam. Today, you are doomed! It appea-
red as though death had a special way to treat visitors.

So blame me [not] if I cut my body to pieces in the na-
me of pleasing father's dying wish. I learnt to dine with

the devil in those last moments. I learnt that breaking
break with the gods required a longer spoon than the

one I had so I became like Johann Faust. So blame me
[not] if I sound suicidal or why does the idea of dying

never leave me be? So blame me [not] for the colour of
my thobe. So blame me [not] for the bug in my eyes.

Blame me [not]. Blame the spoon in my hand. Blame
the puddle of tears in my mother's eyes because nana

went too & never returned. Blame me [not]. Blame my
brother's loudmouth. Blame me [not] for this tattoo

on my left arm carrying father's insignia. Now may you
excuse me while I wipe these mysterious drops of moist-

ure from my eyes? Because father forbade elegies & when
he died, the house fast became a colony of mutes.

AIMAN ISLAM

Bangladesh

The nation cries again,
with it cries the sky.
The young blood
stains the roads,
no sign of life.
They hug their flag, tight
red and green is the nation's pride.
You should look them in the eyes,
see how their souls cry.
They won't step back.
No matter how much you bribe them.
They are not scared of your guns
or the goons you send to kill them.
They are born from the ashes of this country;
how do you expect them to burn so quickly?

Love Yourself

You should see yourself
from my eyes
see how bright you shine
no matter how dark
the night is

You should love yourself
like I love you
and see that
you are perfect too

Save Me

I'd let you colour my sanity,
feel my heartbeat;
and stop me from bleeding,
stop me from breathing.

Black and white
and a touch of grey.
my soul speaks to yours
and they pray,
pray to restore my sanity.
Sinning to stay alive
But I die when I hear
the Demon scream.

Sun Kissed Eyes

Hazel brown in an ocean of deep blues
Crescent smile when it's supposed to be a full moon
His eyes are like a lighthouse
In the middle of nowhere
Calling me home even when I'm castaway.
Waterfalls and flowing rivers cannot contain
my joy when I see him

Sunsets and sunrises witness what
midnight cannot replace
A constellation is indeed a group of stars
but my constellations are those autumn eyes

KLAUS LISTER

Transform

My mum told me that I am a sunset,
My coals, my wounds, they don't define my worth.
But I was gorgeous once, and was content,
Yes, I was life, vitality and birth.

My father said, 'my child, please don't change', but,
Don't you know, that is out of my power?
Like you, I too shall hurt and hurt and *hurt*,
To know that I could have been a flower

But never will be. Pain is what I know.
I watch you hurt over what I can't stop.
My family, you're torn, more than me, so
Why am I the blame, the dark, in the wrong?

~~You told me that I was your sunset, well,
That shouldn't change if I'm a boy or girl.~~

But something has changed, I'm still a sunset,
I am a boy, that fact you now accept.

ADRIENN-KRISZTINA LORINCZI

Notebook

Thrown on the bed, like me a week ago, waiting to be touched.
Or put on the shelf, a jar of jam, holding my deepest thoughts.
Hide and seek it plays alone, praying to be found.
Some open, read and close, saying it's not profound.

For someone who's spent a lifetime in the same place,
this world you chose to live in, isn't a safe space.
Violated with words written in anger,
come on, I'll hold you, so you'll feel no danger.

Words

Boots
marching down the dirt road.
Whose stride is yelling and swearing,
like dads when they drink.

Or no steps.
Silence filling the void
of the intimidating
shoes.

Mud
when the storm is gone, the one
who listens and hides
in holes, going unnoticed.

Rain spotting;
slowly making up for mistakes—
the past.
Beneath the water a flower fights to bloom.

A Delicate Spot

You touched me in a delicate spot.
Made me shiver, a flick of fear,
but I still laugh a lot.

A summer night on a bus drive
I chose something light to wear,
when you touched me in a delicate spot.

You smelled of booze as you passed by,
your eyes told a disgusting 'dear'.
No worries, I still laugh a lot.

I felt your hand go up on my thigh,
my breath froze the atmosphere.
You touched me in a delicate spot.

I'll never escape that smile.
It was burnt in my mind with a tear,
but I still laugh a lot.

Some nights I dream of an eye for an eye:
cutting off your hands, it's clear—
So you couldn't touch me in a delicate spot
and I'd still be able to laugh a lot.

Beauty And The Beast

Once upon a time, I say
This story happened in my brain.
Once upon a time in summer,
you made my heart beat faster.
Once upon a time for a night,
I got to see the trailer of
how it feels to be alive.

I. unification

I plead guilty for drowning in
my own sadness, my own madness.
Your eyes shone so bright they blinded mine—
I followed your light and
as a token of gratitude – you set me free.

A soft hand on my shoulder
wrapping me up with a blanket
that smelled like grass and booze.
You locked my focus in and the cold out.

My darling,
You made me jealous of myself
for you were the non-relative Beauty,
and I, your gawky Beast.

II. love

We danced cause dance needs no words.
My head on your chest
told the story of two young lovers.
Your hands on my hips—
the story of two broken hearts.

We talked about nothing and everything.
Tongue twisters were even the simplest words—
cheap rosé took control of our lips.
I held your hand in mine and followed
the story of your life with my finger
throughout the 27 lines in your left palm
up and down your weirdly attractive, long fingers.

We slept together cause sleeping needs no excuses.
That night we lived a love so unreal
only with your eyes shut you can see;
Time stopped for a moment to paint
our idyllic picture of fall-asleep.

III. annihilation

At dawn I woke up, kissed your forehead one last time.
You were sleeping so silently.
I was the one to disappear from your life.
Still, I wonder if you were Real
and I, the Dream?

HARRY LORRAINE

The Story Of Us

Our story was one in a million;
A rare cosmic fairy tale.
I could have been anyone,
But I ended up being me.
I could have chosen anyone,
But I ended up choosing you.

I would choose you again,
I would choose this story again.
It was such a great pleasure,
To share this dance with you.
So, let's do it again,
In the next life as well.
And the one after that.
Wherever we might end up.

Cosmos

Our forefathers would look up at the cosmos,
Becoming captivated by the stars above.
They would use the stars as a guide to roam,
Always watching the passing of light.
Our eyes now struggle to see those same stars,
We're shocked to see that we've lost our way.

The Deep Dark Black

The deep dark black.
The end of everything
Where the mind stops,
And reality stops.
With no eyes to perceive,
And no soul to feel,
There is only a deep absence.
The flame that is me,
Will one midnight
Flicker no more.
The wind will carry,
The stars will echo,
But I shall not.
Nothing to touch,
Nothing to say.
The party is over.
I made friends,
I kissed and felt love,
I learned how to dance,
And at times – had the floor to myself,
And was able to sing one last song.
I didn't know it was my last.
Now I'm in the taxi home,
Crying and looking at the rain hitting the window,
Feeling the buzz of the party,
Feeling the dread of the night ending.
The taxi driver is not taking me home,

He's taking me nowhere.
That is the point.
To the deep dark black.
I had my final breaths,
I remembered who my mother was,
And then I forgot who I was.
Laying deep in thought,
A state with no top,
And no bottom,
No boundaries.
My fingers cupped my thumbs,
My tongue retreated to the back of my mouth.
My eyes finally fell shut.
I had seen the final spectacle.
What an incredible feeling it was,
That feeling of being.
I sunk to the point of no return.
There was nothing to see,
Nothing to feel, remember or touch.
It was only me.
I was truly alone.
And then there was no me.
And I was no longer alone.
There was no I.
There never was an I.
There never was everything.
There never will be anything.
There is not.
The deep dark black.

LUCY MADDIX

Childhood

Warm summer nights bring beautiful sunsets,
as we eagerly sip our hot chocolates with quiet joy
and whisper about our hopes and dreams.
Our sky is a fading canvas, its waning colours tell a story.
Then gently, darkness creeps in like a curtain drawn
by a delicate hand. Flickering stars of the
night sky are freshly lit candles. I often marvel
that this is the same sky our ancestors
once blossomed under.
Yearning to feel close to them, looking up,
wholeheartedly wishing and praying to
the celestial plane above, we lay.
Fresh morning dew materialises.
The sun gladly greets us with its light
and arches over us again. In the tall grass, we run like
lion cubs – there's no such thing as tomorrow – we have all the
time in the world. Under cover of the foggiest nights,
I know I'll always have a lighthouse to warn me
when I can't see the rocky shore below.
These are the things I'll cherish about my childhood:
I felt safe in the shelter of innocence,
curiosity knew no bounds,
and nature was synonymous with freedom.



Sunsets of Africa

Paint my world with a thousand sunsets of Africa / when the sun goes down and adorns the sky with a spectrum of everchanging coloured light / Paint my world with a thousand sunsets of Africa / We'll walk along the gold coast of Ghana as the tide pulls in and out, and sorely wonder how many ships sailed on these waters 400 years ago / Waves burying a haunting of a land once carved out and devoured by colonial greed / Paint my world with the rainbows in a thundery storm / an exhibition of bold and bright bursts cut through the grey clouds stirred across the sky / Torrential rainfall beating the sandy terrain / Paint my world with celebrations / confetti tossed in the air / happiness / anticipation / Paint my world with brilliant blues / bright sunshine / the remembrance of those who have gone on before / Each new day gives us a chance to start over / but not to forget / Paint my world with a thousand sunsets of Africa / and the fullness of its beauty yet to be wholly beheld



MAIBO

H_Love

In the midst of poignancy,
You paced into my life like a cool breeze.
Me, who never believed in love at first sight,
Understood the fluttering of my heart.

My heart enlightened in a way that, I felt,
I am holding it for a glimpse of you.
When I am zoned out,
Seeing you surged my perseverance.

I understood,
I was in love with you.
The phrase 'falls head over heels for someone',
Reflected in my heart.

Every year,
I tried to be by your side,
But you warded me off like I was nobody.
I know for you,
I am no one
But for me,
You are the only one.

Year after year,
I tried to woo you.
I changed myself,
Moulded again and again.

Did you know,
The lazy me is nowhere to be seen.
To be by your side,
I work day and night.
I understand,
My happiness is found by being near you.
Maybe we aren't compatible
But my heart flutters when you are away,
I am on the verge of death.

Love you till eternity...
Will cherish you like no one else.
The love in my eyes,
The heart beating for you
The enticed me,
All remains the same.

Thus,
I embolden myself to be with you
And make you mine.

DARREN RICHARD MARSH

C

I see the sea at the sea,
do you see the sea at the sea?
I do not see the sea at the sea,
because I cannot see the sea at the sea,
because I cannot see.

The Human Genie

I am the human genie, always have been, always will be.
I've helped so many people in the past, with no credit to my name.
I once was set free by electricity.
The future is everywhere and anywhere you want to be.
Being the human genie is not always what it's cracked up to be.
One day I will be back, and that is a fact.
Free to be me and not just a wish for people to see.

LYDIA MARSHALL

Dance

Bodies collide and they glide,
Smooth as the slithering snakes.
Fingers intertwine, breaking spines,
Distant hearts reconnect.
Thick whiskers scratch her reddened face,
She doesn't seem to mind.
Warm like a hot beverage in winter.
It's dark but they shine
Gyrating hips, legs turn to jelly
Sweeping the floor as they sway,
Hearts beating, heavy breathing;
No departing, only cleaving.
I hope this night never ends.



Optimism

Glass full or empty
Embracing the change within
Protecting the peace

Secure



My love is steady
My mind is undefeated
Renewed and refined



Purpose

Predestined vessel
Empowered with clarity
Blessed beyond measure

AISHA MCNAMARA

Swansong For You

This is your end
Don't pretend
It's time for you to leave
At least I can breathe

Waving not drowning
Tumbling not throwing
It's a Swansong for you
Swansong for you

This is my end
They want to believe
It's my time to leave
Don't pretend that you heave

Thumbling not flicking
Getting not knowing
It's a Swansong for me
Swansong for me

This is our end
Don't pretend
It's time for us to leave
At least we can breathe
It's a Swansong for you
It's a Swansong for me
to let it beat again

LAURA MILES

A Parochial Kind Of Feeling

Remembering summer tenderness
As unreciprocated favours
Untouched in your bedsheets.
Hidden hands held in lonely spaces,
A parochial kind of feeling.

Peachy fuzz and tweezer-plucked skin,
I miss smeared lipstick under our work uniforms,
Your combed ringlets clothing shoulder blades.
Tracing your acne like constellations:
I had found Canopus.

You asked for my femininity
So I shaved your legs in the tub.
With razors, creams, and kisses,
We laughed as hair clogged the drain,
Revealing reborn limbs.

You kissed promises into my ear,
Aroused a future beyond village greens,
Metropolitan longings for lack of shame.
I'm glad you found yours.
I can't wait for mine.

October Bed

I'm glad I'm out of habit of making my bed.
Stillborn heat forms your ghost in a blanket
Lazing under a comatose daylight.

You left in the October night,
A pit replacing you on my pillow,
A spectre of a kiss on my cheek.

Forgotten relics hide in my linen:
Strands of hair, an eyelash, a pubic hair.
Parting presents from your body.

Cast Along

I was cast along in the cusp of summer,
Your fibres laced in mine,
Stitching me, breathing life into me.
Blind on your project,
I entrusted your needles to weave
Me as a lover would.
Soft and neat cotton strings were my fibres,
Continuing until your fingers wept.

The weather cooled and warmed again,
And I realised what we made.
Our fibres burned – inescapable heat.
Needles sharpened and pricked at my skin,
You were unravelling me, each thread undone,
Now fraying and creased.
I lay in my pile, used, and discarded,
My fibres clinging to what you made me into.

SHENESE MOODLIAR

We're Spicy

I watched my mixed-race mother heat
sunflower oil in her special AMC pot.
A step-by-step becomes a necessity
through my generational Indian taste buds.
'Next you must add your dry spices.'
'Is that the spidery looking one?'
'Yes,' she laughs, 'these are very important.'
'How will I remember this when you die?'
pop-pop
pop-pop-pop
The smell of star anise, cumin and cardamon
filled our basement kitchen, floating up and into the two holes on
my face.
'Time to add the onions.
They need to sweat a little bit
and then we can add our masala,' Mum said.
Is this what deep-rooted culture is?
Specifically buying Durban Masala
every time we go back 'home',
hoping we don't get stopped at Gatwick,
watching mum unpack it all into recycled
Yankee Candle jars and neatly organising them
into her 'spice cupboard.' Will I be like this?
How long will traditional spices be passed down
from generation-to-generation?
I can't afford to be the one to break it.
I must learn my cuisine, my culture.

'Now we can add the lamb,'
freshly washed in vinegar and water,
lightly dusted in turmeric.
crackle-frizzle-sputter
'Stir and combine everything together and leave for a few mins.'
Elements of spices, powders and meat,
Kashmiri masala mainly for colour.
Every element combining to end in enjoyment
made me realise this:
elements of races, ages and sizes,
Kashmiri masala mainly for colour.

Ignominious

Lickle, lickle, tickle
dampy moist asshole
she move to the left
her move to the right
itchy asshole.
Stretch leg to the side and squeeze
sad
still itchy
no relief
not just me but all of you
no speak though but we all do.

Lickle, lickle, tickle
white headed pussy,
sorry actually white headed puss-y* spot protruding

from the spikey chin hair situation
pop out of there you little bastard
ouch!

1

2

3

Out you squeeze and fly onto dirty mirror to join the rest of them
happy spot flying.

Lickle, lickle, tickle
crampy devil cramps

Satan proceeds to destroy uterus with red sword
poke

poke
and red river flows with clumpy bits of gut laying dead on a pad.
Death?
Lickle, lickle, tickle,
more hiding
no speak.

Sanguszko

Oh, please dark beauty take me to Persia
I want to see the Yakhchāls in Persia.

Nevermind about going not to sea,
I want to go then to Cyrus Persia.

Let's sit in paradise garden. Listen:
sounds of Cyrus freeing the Jews in Persia.

Dark beauty find the *Sanguszko carpet*,
I want to sift, taste dusty life Persia.

Teach me how to write *SCM* in your Persian,
oh, dark beauty we must not leave Persia.

MARIANA SANTOS PINHO

*the place underneath my bed (where bed means
mind) and no one is allowed in*

scents of peppermint vapour
fill the air in the room
where out of place
everything is not
from books to clothing
hanging and displayed
like rainbow colours
where every corner catches
your attention away from the
ticking time bomb underneath
the
the
place where you pretend to rest
but when your eyelids are too
heavy to hold
and you dilute inside the warmth
your blankets' effuse
you slip into
another dimension
and that place below spins inside out

begins again
the bed and the ticking time
wall, that you just chuck under
and all that heavy mess mass left?
shades into tints
the shadows and turns
where the sun blinds
could put everything back into place
that
that
you search for that tumbling sensation
over intensely every time
cracking whispers and unsteady steps
dim mixed cardinal mixed coal
now tipped and bleeding
from what was once floor and walls
out of place is
everything that
the dusty dense air that surrounds
ashes fall from the ceiling and joins

glimpsed joyful memories

i could hold you for hours
more like
barely move so you can sleep

i could smell you for hours
more like
take a photo of your cologne to buy it later

i could listen to you for hours
more like
try to convince you to call me instead of texting

i could taste you for hours
more like
kiss you every time as if it was the first

i could stare at you for hours
more like
lose myself in your gaze

ginger eyes
foreign freckles
turquoise beard
blonde accent

forgive me the collusion synapses
of my heart



it always happens when i shiver
& i haven't done it in...
so long

long enough to have forgotten
how it feels

JACCO POTT

The More Things We Say, The Less We Believe In

Words dangle down, the wearisome rope frays
It sounds like speaking underwater
Voices mutter somewhere in the distance
Fading in and out of existence
Scrolling from page to page
Another written unheard opinion
To be honest, I can't get enough of it

RICH PRYCE-WILLIAMS

Grass

The grass breaths, heady summer breeze.
Pulsing slowly he opens his musk,
Sprays over sand dunes, out to the sea.
Doused over meadows, searching for seeds.
Carried on the thermals, botanical lust.

Tall slender elegance, rigid masculinity.
Verdant greens and azure blues, in swathes
Cutting through the land from ocean to mountain peak.
Standing tall in sunshine he bathes.
Strong but simple symmetry, pointed and sleek.

Rough to the touch, yet smooth in opposition.
His surface holds beads of moisture, cradled in finest hair.
Released at the morning light, an ardent tradition,
Maintaining dawn's cycle, cooling the air
Conveying convection. Atmospheric gauge.

Deep roots, tangled vermicular infiltration
Penetrating the earth in thirst driven frenzy.
He entwines and strangles his aggregate foundation.
Staking his claim on the landscape, extending
Both above and deep below, deep within.

Soft feathered flowers reveal hidden sensitivity.
Blooming delicately from his outstretched tip,
Lilting carefree on a forgotten sweet zephyr,



Carry sweet nectar, sticky and fresh,
Butterflies flutter to take a brief sip.

And there you laid, on your back in the field
Completing the scene, completing my day.
Reflecting the perfection of the surrounding nature,
Catching my breath, smiling up from the hay.
Completing my soul, my meadow bouquet.

Promises

Have you pulled me apart or sewn me together?
Coursing through my fibres
Like a biological powder.
Late summer last year you said you'd endeavour
To maintain a pact, you had woven so clever.
Knitting my feelings and meshing my candour,
I trusted your lies, digested your banter.
That promise of love eternal and true,
You have ripped it apart and torn me in two.

The feelings are still strong though,
Like long burning embers
Lit last September.
Your passion and sincerity
I still remember,
And like a twisted knife,
The pain now grows.
The wounds tender.

Was scaring my heart your hidden intention?
Secretly planning your tryst.
Iscariot deception
Played to perfection
Lingered behind your true kiss.

The deed it was done
One hour of pleasure!

Your tongue, mouth, organs,
Worked at their leisure.
Helping some stranger
Find buried treasure!
Betraying my love,
Heart and trust
Tainted forever!

So here I am hanging the clothes on the line.
Fake spring fragrance lingers nostalgic
Like your smell in our bed
And your promise in my ear.
I wipe my tears dry for one more time
On an item of clothing you left behind
One I still wash, with your favourite conditioner
Realising time has singed my feelings
And my memories have become bitter.

A promise. What is it?
Except heartfelt commitment
Hastily spoken.
Or a mediocre sentiment
Waiting to be broken.

DESANTILA QERIMAJ RRANXA

Autumn Haiku

Carved pumpkins smile,
bound to an empty sorrow –
once they had ample form.

One apple falling!
Since Eden was created,
apple is all humans.

October end dims,
unforgotten glaring sea –
memories start to snow.

Deepened amber is
prodding my heart, this flower
secretly steals spring.

Don't fall into the trap
of branches in love with grey,
their roots feed in water.

Words

In the challenge to conquer a new form
a new language, feelings
stanzas, lines or expectations
I found myself searching
a love for the unknown.
While axes chop old meanings
as forgotten memories do.

In the need to understand the world
tears come out slowly
from my favourite book's
metaphors, verses
bewildered in people's shoulders
revealing their steps, all they have –
their everyday life and traditions.

There's the poet's aura
climbing on water every hour
perhaps not only his, but mine
and yours too
aching through that nothing we fear
blooming through that everything we seek
the ongoing, untouchable burden of time.

There are the music notes
atoning into sadness, rhythm bursting
long awaited epiphanies! Like the artist

bites what he sees with brushes.
In the end seals in a frame
histories that hang on our being.

Here I am
trying not to be a stagnant word
trying to name all meanings
trying to write if I can become
what my words say.

MUHUMMAD KHURRAM SALIM

Ouair

I didn't ditch tit-bits in winning it big.
Lit bits sit fittingly in with my mind.
Cigs rightly in bin dim zilch, pinning gigs.
I sing I will find mills, drinking in grinds.

Oh ol owls wrong not bots to woo low moods.
Ho, own fond songs opt to tow pot strong growth.
Lots nod to crow so of cors grow my broods.
Flow holy odour word rows from my mouth.

Say at that play shall rally that smart art.
All that shall grab ant-small flat and that's that.
Parts and war-parts dart sharp saws at art marts.
My parts ran far and swat away drab rats.

Up u-turn upturn, um, u dun gud guy.
Must gun fur sunny fun run tru' mugs buy.

JULIE SANFORD

Leaves

As I walk amongst the fallen leaves
it is not nature's wonder that springs to mind
Instead I ponder, hackles risen who else walks this path well hidden.
Am I heard? Am I in someone's vision?
Darkness becoming my restrictive prison.
The Beast beside me watching my back
but other women never had this hack.

Mothers, sisters daughters and friends
meeting their slaughterer on well-trodden bends.
Safety gone, protection ridden, fight or flight a redundant decision.
Too late to backtrack. Future stolen
last breath escaping the leaves looking golden.

AMBER SPRINGER

Love Is A Very Interesting Thing

Love is a very interesting thing.
It's a state that can be expressed in a number of ways.
Some people write and some people sing.
Love can ignite us with a blaze
Or make us feel like we're soaring on wings.
Love can make us go crazy or simply amaze.
We can love many things because of the happiness they bring.
Love can be all-encompassing, or it can just be a phase.
Love can make you feel every day is spring,
Love can make you feel you're stuck in a maze,
As I mentioned before, love is a very interesting thing.
It can be expressed in a number of ways.
It can make us cry and it can make us shout,
Some might say that's what love's all about.

Trapped

Trapped, alone... With no one to hold or take comfort in. Darkness surrounds you, where you are blinded without being blind; on your own without a shoulder to cry on; feeling suffocated even though there's air all around you. Loneliness is a maddening feeling that can cause you to imagine you are locked up in a prison cell, and although there's no physical one, you feel confined all the same. A prison of the mind, where mental prisons can be as confining as physical ones, occasionally even more so... Trapped, alone... But prison is not the only place where you may feel trapped. Life itself can feel like a prison. Doing the same thing over and over again, following the same routine; the chains of your commitments and responsibilities wrapped tightly around you; unable to break free as you're using all your strength to hold up the unimaginably heavy weights of life.

Money

Sustenance

Dependants

Family

All these forces are weighing down on you and you find yourself stuck, doomed to follow the same routine over and over until you can no longer handle the heaviness of life. Or until they

unexpectedly

increase in

weight,

prematurely extinguishing out your life.

*of life in death
from the constraints
is being released
Perhaps true freedom*

DANIA STEPHENSON

Eternal Beings

Pause

Perceive me as I am
in this very moment
Notice that I am
everything and beyond
what you seem to see

I am glimpse of you

A reflection that mirrors
your being
Most importantly
I am the physical gate that holds you
Between 'now' and eternity...

MARJANA SULTANA

To Us Who Wither Away

To use this moment as an escape from reality.
To us who wither away.
Willing or not, patiently or not, gradually or not.
There are those who deprive us
Of what little we have left.
We are like canvases, bereft of hues.
To have our revelation of suffering used.
As a way to accuse us of being different.
When we are alike with the way we cope
Lost in the memories of our past selves.

She, who doesn't sleep, panics away.
I see myself in her and her surviving state,
Her exacerbated breathing and stormy eyes.
Numb hands hold helplessly onto a thread of hope.
The red string of fate wraps around her lungs.
Then snaps in half by the ones she loved.
Watch her try and unravel and mend it.
If only she had known it all then.
Would she have done it all over again?
She carries an immortal regret in the long march of time.

To her who withers away first, consumes the hatred
Of those who did not understand.
Comes face to face with her inner black swan.
She struggles at the bottom of a stagnant sea.
And like an etiolated, frail flower,

She dwindles and deteriorates all alone in the darkness
And seeks a remedy out of the jaws of the doldrums.
Like a prosaic poem, she is overlooked and misread.
She who is embittered with a tinge of withering self-esteem.
Hope she finds peace as she lives and forgets how to breathe.

Ephemerality

They say nothing will last forever or remain the same.
But I am afraid it will last longer than
I can see myself handling everything around me.
And as the days go by in insufferable numbers,
I watch the sun surfacing in the serene scenery
Of a morning mist that light up my homeland,
Then sink low behind the mournful, bare elms,
Allowing the moon to rise from its peaceful sleep.
Like me, the harbingers of light survive day and night,
They exist only on the verge of being lost in sight.
How the most beautiful things go from:
Seen to unseen, need to inessential.
Loved to forgotten about, depended to treated lightly.
What hope is there for someone as ruined as me,
Who has lost sight of who they are?
Like me, they get a taste of being alone and abandoned.
But with dignity, they thrive under a thousand proud stars.

Blossoming in Dark Times

Watering my soul like it's a thirsty flower,
Just for it to dwindle and wither away.
Once it's exposed to a world full of
Light and darkness, madness and wonder.
I am rained in, drowned by the streams of losses.
I feel entitled to sprout up like a moonflower
And grow from what has been taken from me.
But I am losing more than what I want to receive.
Have I lost myself or have I gained you?
I have become so damaged that when you give me
What you think I deserve and need,
I have no idea on how to respond
Like a deer in front of searing headlights. Am I ruined or am I the
epitome of ruinous?
But I have found hope that feels like a sunrise,
In the form of your kind love.

ANAIS TINEZ

When Lives Are Lost

When we start to care, we fear
The inability chosen is
the failure others will abide.
And yet we know
the limits imposed by us
are the loopholes for ignorance,
easier to face and harder to brave.
Somehow some are
The Hope that few can see
from a society we only dare follow.
But if people only knew
they are their own gatekeeper.
But we are blinded by dust from the sky.
Messages that we cannot read
From Our earth.
Hidden by Vanity
we treasure as more important,
disregarding our tiers.
History showed us wrong ways
That we shall avoid.
But time made us forget, as our will to know
Lost its way to sleep regardless tales.
When Time is running, and Fame is fading
Actions are hopes we cannot waive.

BURÇAK TURAN

Autumn In Me

Now I can watch the sunsets that I love, a lot more
But my hands and feet are freezing,
Like making someone feel cold if I touch them,
Like goosebumps kind of cold...
Nature had closed its eyes,
And birds flew to some other lands.
Since the rhythm of life slowed down a little,
As so, its music had begun to play under a few octaves of happiness.
While the blues turned to greys and whites,
Greens turned to yellows and browns.
My feelings were moving up and down, as usual
They are still the same, hasn't change and won't change...

Funny Feelings

I'm in love with love
But what is love for me?
A scene from a romance movie
A few words from a random novel
A sentence that someone said to me
A fantasy that I created in my unreality
I sense some funny feelings in my body
I'm waiting – perfect love comes to me
I'm screaming for my wishes and dreams
I'm running every night in my sleep
To find something that I really like
Where can I find it where can I take it
Is there a thing even exist like an apple or a star?
I'm okay but I'm sad
I'm waiting and loving everything that could help

Once Upon A Time

She has colours around her
but,
A little bit of darkness in her soul.
He has a dark spirit
but,
He enlightened with the moonlight.
They were similar in different ways
but,
They lived without knowing that
They looked right,
They looked left,
and finally,
They looked up
but,
They never looked back.
Sadly,
Happiness was hiding right behind their back.

ANDREA ULIBARRENA

Portrait of My Lover As A Grain of Sand

You slip
through my fingers—
the perfect symmetry
of you,

the tiny parts
that make
the beautiful whole.
The vicious waves crash
against the shore

of us;

I hold you in my hand
until the wind
blows you away.
You disappear
into the identical crowd;
your atoms are lovely
and your harmony clear
but you'd never make
the whole

of me

MARIA-CRISTINA VASILE

The Eternal Flame

What is supposed to happen
Don't worry, whatever it will be
If you give yourself space to dream,
It's gonna happen, you will see.

You and your inner self
Being one, being blessed
As a team, do your best!
And surrender the rest.

In the end, it's not about being patient.
It's about embracing the fact
That everything is just an ancient act
Unfolding when is the divine impact.

In the end, who are we ?
If not just another eternal flame
Of the collective consciousness game;
Streaming unique and temporary
Through another human body.

ISMAIL ZAMAN

The Alpha And The Omega

All moments led here
I cannot make sense of anything.
A great disturbance to my soul
expresses itself with shocks of stress,
relentless confusion and undying agony.
Rage masquerades as honest and fulfilling
but we know the real you.
I won't give in, even though you appear true.
You exist for moments which earn disrespect, but not now.
In my world divine, there is no inculcation of perception
which should belong to anyone other than me.
I contemplate without end, gliding on the spirals to paradise
only finding uncomfortable truths, falling fiercely to doom.
In the thick of flame, I remember reality distantly.
It calls out, looking down at me with contempt,
I want to be there with you, but I disassociate—
don't you garner my sadness but mistake it for intention.
I am aware of my inhibitions.
My brain, the gigantic receiver, wishes to make an enemy of me—
It has sported the thievery of my balance and encouraged delusions.
Even though I have restored some semblance of reality
I am forever tainted by you.
Tainted by my alien brain, tainted by my own reason.

All moments led here
for me to contemplate and conceptualise.
There is truth in suffering, I have never known its lack of presence,
instilling words of power translating to feats of strength inside of me.

The reanimation of a prophecy begins now—
an ideal world. No. An ideal struggle.
I have lived long without indulgence,
why should I turn tail now, now that I'm gifted with the agony of
abnormality.

There are possibilities, with the finest version of events
where winners and warriors flock upon grand fields
to meet with soldiers chiselled by tenacity.
Against everything they strove to birth that reality,
conquering everything in their midst, not sparing a single thing.
Grimacing at the lottery that is life, which can declare how strong
or weak you are
before you are born, before you have declared yourself to travel
pious paths.

There is no understanding without consideration—
for everything out of our control
in perfectly ordered synchronicities all flows together in one
formidable stream.

God gives His hand to the water, and it is.
It becomes. It is decided. Utterly.
If predetermination is divinity, I accept that possibility,
against predetermination I will strive remorselessly.
Even if everything lies in our hands
there is so much hidden in this material design of Terra that
dictates without our knowledge.

I don't care about any of it.
I don't care if God is playing chess with our reality, I don't care if
it's all up to us.
I don't care about becoming normal again.

All moments led here
for me to conceptualise a Hell Chamber.
One which I must call home.
It is to be free from all thought and reason.

If it leads me to terrible places, so be it.
If I conquer my reality, then I have no complaints.
If I am right I have no feeling—
If I am wrong I have no feeling.
Winning or losing doesn't matter to me anymore.
I don't care about vanquishing everything—
I will no longer be overcome by trials.
There is no unsettling groan from my heart
which beats terrifyingly against my ribcage.
There are no sleepless nights poisoned with a throbbing of the eyes
which sacrifices my physical capabilities.
There are no screams I hear in my head
which sickens me into mania.
There is no delusional trickster tugging at me with a rope
which leads me to worlds unknown.
At the end of everything
it seems that this was the best I could make for myself.
I will follow this path of struggling not knowing where I am
headed;
never have I known it before, never will I know it again.
Nothing will overcome me. I can control everything.
I am all moments.

III. PROSE



ZARIN CHOUDHURY

Storm

The rain roared, undaunted by the girl's profound gaze as she surveyed the world outside. Blood red battled against flaming orange with all its might, whilst an ocean blue snuck up on the two. It overpowered them, gradually consuming both colours and smearing itself across the sky.

The girl let go of a soft sigh, a suppressed sound of sadness. She adjusted her aching head against the leather seat underneath her. It never occurred to her how uncomfortable she'd be, but she didn't care much. The seatbelt cut into her frozen skin, but she didn't move again. Instead, she listened intently to the ground getting bullied by an exhaustive number of mini bullets.

'Seventy, seventy-one, seventy-two...' There were too many raindrops to count, despite her numerous attempts to. '... Hmm, did I miss a number?'

Her light whispers ricocheted against the transparent roof above her head and the car windows. It sounded like the voice of a child compared to the storm's reverberations of rage. Her wide eyes were glassy and captured the maddening sky, whilst her face was utterly still, like no one was inside. Her pale fingers clutched onto a delicate piece of gold, which twinkled in the day's waning light. It was the only thing of brilliant colour inside her little bubble, and yet was the thing she felt was most grey.

'You're so angry.' The storm screeched louder, as thunder and lightning infused into a furious image of sound and light. 'Are you me?'

Her questions hung heavily, like the bleeding clouds outside. They were almost gone now, dissolving rapidly like they'd never

existed. The storm was too strong, creating chaos that no one could control. She thought of how the indigo sky looked like a canvas of her mind, a mixture of devouring darkness and havoc.

‘Why are we so angry? Why is no one else?’

Water spilled, but this time it wasn’t from nature. It glided down her cheeks, causing them to glow, and she finally looked like she had some life. It was ironic. The sadness gave her something to feel. Her body was numb, but at least she wasn’t. She was a quiet sort of fury, a harmony of resentment and pain.

She held up the golden piece. Dots of luminous light danced around her, pretty beams that played and twirled. The intricate locket was too expensive, but he’d insisted on it, and she could never say no to him. The laughing faces inside looked bizarre, like strangers she’d never known – like someone she’d never been. Happiness looked wrong, and she wanted to warn them. Thunder screamed at the sight of the picture, but she couldn’t make a sound.

‘Why did you choose to go? Where do I go?’

She heard the crashes of the distant sea and flinched, staring at his grin. When had he stopped smiling? She couldn’t remember. Things had gotten so rough, and each day he looked like he was living less and less. She hid her face from the storm, her body curling into a vulnerable ball.

The waves rang, like a funeral song, and the water shouted as she sobbed. The world dimmed, fading out. The only thing she could hear now was the sound of the tides, of the ocean...

His last splash.

Water. It called her name, and instead of him, she imagined herself jumping. Maybe he was waiting for her in the cerulean sea that had always connected them. She couldn’t breathe. She cried out,

her grief drowning her. The storm rumbled deafeningly, engulfing her wails of anguish.

She wasn't the one that had decided to die, so why did it feel like she was the one that had lost her life?

LAURA EVANS

My Last Duchess

Rose finally returned to Winterbrook Manor. After all these years, she couldn't ignore the rumours anymore. She needed to find the truth.

The taxi drove her up to what was once one of the finest houses in the country but was now overgrown and derelict. Weeds covered the driveway and water no longer flowed from the fountain. Ivy climbed every inch of the manor, cloaking it protectively.

Rose stepped out of the taxi and paid the driver. She turned around to look at Winterbrook but found herself face to face with the Duke. He was a tall, severe man with dark hair and sharp bones. Back in the day, Rose could always sense that he was something different, but couldn't grasp what. But as she stared into his eyes, it didn't feel like he was hiding for once. It felt like a warning.

'My dear Rose, how lovely to see you again after all these years,' the Duke said. 'You can't imagine the shock I had on receiving your letter, but I'm so glad you've decided to return.'

'It has indeed been too long. I owe it to her to keep an eye on you and Winterbrook,' Rose answered.

'Please. I would hope we're friends by now and not a debt to be paid.'

'Check on you as a friend then. I'm glad I did now, the place is not looking good. Have you been well?'

'I'm perfectly fine, my dear. It's only the outside that looks out of form. It means I no longer have to host those dreadful parties. I decided against having a gardener, but I rather think the ivy adds a bit of character, don't you think?'

Rose and the Duke passed through the grand doors. The manor had been redecorated since she had last been there. What had been

a bright, colourful and grand building, was now dark, depressing and intimidating. The Duke had replaced everything with his own designs, preserving nothing.

The Duke directed Rose to a room on the left, remembering it as the sitting room. She was proved correct, but of course the style had changed. A noticeable change was the placement of a certain portrait upon the wall above the fireplace. A woman captured in her prime; beautiful in her red gown, her dark hair falling over her shoulders, and a glorious ruby ring to match.

'Duchess. My last Duchess. No one could ever replace her,' the Duke said, standing next to Rose as they both looked up at the painting.

'I still can't believe what happened,' Rose said.

'Have you heard from Duchess?' The Duke asked.

'Never. Not once,' Rose answered.

'I guess a part of me thought you had returned with news from her. Stupid really, I expect she wanted to cut everyone out of her life.'

'It's not stupid, Duke. I am, err was, her closest friend. I've searched for her everywhere, but no such luck.'

'Is that why you've returned to Winterbrook? To find her?'

'Yes, I thought maybe she could have left other clues. As long as it's not rude of me to go through her things, of course.'

'I wish you luck. I've never been able to find anything. Since you've been gone, I have moved everything of the Duchess' to her room. So it may be crowded. You are more than welcome to go through it.' The Duke went to leave. 'Now, I have some business to attend to, if you'll excuse me. This sitting room is all yours while you're here if you would like some privacy. I trust you remember where the Duchess' room is. I'll see you at dinner.'

The Duke left. Rose stood alone in the room for a while, looking at the portrait of Duchess.

‘Don’t worry, I’ll find out the truth for you, my love,’ Rose said to the painting, before leaving the room.

Rose quietly wandered about the manor, going the long way to Duchess’ room. She couldn’t find anything out of place or suspicious, but then why would there be anything in the open? She paused outside of Duchess’ room. Scared to go in. Scared of the memories, the pain. Rose turns the handle and finds the room in a mess, surrounded by every single object owned by Duchess: clothes, furniture, ornaments, and pictures. Rose opened the curtains, coughing as the dust fell off them. She dreaded how long it was going to take. Frankly, the less time she spent in the manor the better.

Rose opened the wardrobe first; she knew somewhere there was a key that opened a secret part of the Duchess’ desk. If there were any important letters or documents, they would be in there. If not, then the Duke would have found and destroyed them.

The wardrobe was full of all beautiful clothes, never to be worn again. Rose spotted the stunning red gown Duchess wore the night they first met, the same one in the portrait. She grabbed the dress and hugged it tight; it still smelt like her. Maybe she’d even take it back with her. The Duke wouldn’t notice anyway.

She spent a couple of hours searching the whole room, trying to find where the key could possibly be hidden. Frustrated and tired, Rose sat on the floor brainstorming ideas, recalling conversations that could be possible clues. She dozed off a little, remembering Duchess’s velvety voice saying, ‘Look to the stars, they will always show you the path.’

Rose shot up, maybe that was a clue. She looked up at the ceiling, at the chandelier, and hanging in the centre amongst the dusty glass

was a tiny box. Rose looked around the room for something that would reach it; there was no way she'd be able to reach it herself. She would surely fall if she climbed up there. Duchess must have had something near to reach it, otherwise how did she grab it herself? Rose decided to look under the bed and found a pole with a small hook on the end, something that would have opened a window in the past.

After a few attempts, she managed to unhook the box. Opening it, she sighed in relief, as a small key sat within. She took it and went over to the desk in the corner and searched for some sort of hidden compartment. There were no papers in the desk, nothing that showed Duchess' handwriting. The Duke probably got rid of them all, which added to Rose's suspicions that the supposed letter the Duchess wrote was forged. She had only seen the letter briefly at the time, but not long enough to judge, and after all these years her memory was not as it was.

She crawled under the desk and looked underneath; there was a small hidden keyhole in the corner. Rose tried the key and it fit. A small section of the desk fell into Rose's lap, along with some papers.

She flicked through them quickly, then gasped as one of the letters was addressed to her, unopened. Rose's hands started to tremor. Could this be her answer, her piece of hope to numb the heartbreak? She opened it gently:

'My dear, dear Rose,

I've made my choice. The Duke has threatened me for the last time, and I fear for my life the next time I cross him – but then you already know all that. I leave tonight and I want you to come with me. I can't imagine my life without you. Meet me in the garden at midnight under starlight.

Forever your loving Duchess.'

Tears fell onto the page as Rose sobbed in happiness and despair: she had not been abandoned. Their friendship did mean something. This was the proof she needed and now she also had example of the Duchess' genuine handwriting.

Rose's next plan was to go to the Duke and ask if she could see the letter. There was a small chance that he would show her, especially if he was confident that no other examples of the Duchess' hand existed.

She hid the papers in her pocket and made her way towards the Duke's study. It was in an area of the house she rarely frequented in the past, but somehow her body knew where to go. She turned down a small corridor when suddenly she had a most violent flashback. Rose had to lean against the wall for a second. This was the corridor that night. The blood on the floor. The red stain taking over the purple dress. Her friend. It couldn't be. She had walked away, shocked. Hid in Duchess' bedroom. Only to return and find nothing there, no blood. Only a letter found in the morning saying the Duchess had left, that no one will find her. That she wanted a different life. Yes. She had wanted a different life. Not with the Duke, but with her, her Rose!

Rose had managed to convince herself for years that she was going mad. That she never saw anything. Her mind could not register what her eyes saw that her best friend had been the same woman on the floor that night. Somehow it was easier to accept that Rose had been betrayed and abandoned. That one day they'll find each other again. But on her travels, she had heard rumours, of a husband who hated his marriage; that he'd do anything to get out of it. Rumours that could no longer be ignored. Rose had come here to find evidence, justice, and revenge.

She knocked on the Duke's door. 'Enter,' he shouted. Rose

entered looking sheepish and disappointed, feigning that she had been unsuccessful in her mission. 'Ah, it's you. Is everything alright?' he asked.

'Not quite. I haven't had any luck finding anything. If it's not presumptuous for me to ask. Do you still have Duchess' letter? The one she gave you the night she left. If I could read it, maybe there's something hidden in it,' Rose asked.

'I do still have it. You're more than welcome to read it, although I doubt Duchess left clues. I've read it often enough and have found none.' The Duke opened a drawer and brought out the letter, handing it to Rose. 'If you could read it in here please, I'd rather it not be lost.'

Rose read the letter quickly. He was right. There were no hidden messages, but then again it was forged. Comparing the writing to the papers she had seen; it was not perfect. Although, he had done a perfect job of mimicking Duchess' voice. She handed the letter back, somehow, she would have to get hold of it tonight before she leaves. She noted the drawer the Duke placed it back in.

'Thank you. You were right, nothing,' Rose said.

'Maybe you should stop searching for answers and come to terms with what has happened. You'll only torment yourself into an early grave,' the Duke said.

'I think I will. My investigations have finally reached a dead end. Thank you for accommodating me, I'm sure I've been a nuisance,' Rose pretended.

'I assure you; you have not been a nuisance. I've enjoyed seeing you again. I'm glad I've helped you finally come to terms. Now, dinner is in an hour, we should start getting ready. You can use any room you like to freshen up in,' the Duke said, as he escorted her out of the study.

Rose made her way back to the living room, but not before she made a detour to Duchess' room and changed into her favourite red gown.

She stared at the portrait again as it grew dark outside. 'I'm nearly there now. I've just got to get that letter, and it'll be enough to open an investigation. Then I can find out what that monster did to you,' Rose said to the painting. The dinner gong sounded, and she made her way to the dining room.

The Duke and Rose sat at opposite ends of the table and ate in relative silence.

'That's a lovely dress you have on, dear,' he said. 'It looks very familiar.'

'It's the Duchess's, the same one as in the portrait,' Rose replied.

'You two look very similar. You almost gave me a heart attack when I came in,' he said, giving a little laugh.

A silence stretched across the room. They were in the middle of the main course, when Rose excused herself, needing the ladies' room. This was her chance now to get the letter, whilst he was detained.

Rose found his study quickly, luckily left unlocked. She closed the door behind her and started to go through the desk. She had brought a candle with her, so she would not reveal herself in the harsh electric light. A few minutes passed and Rose started to get anxious. She was taking too long. He had moved the letter; it wasn't in the same drawer as earlier.

There was a deafening click behind her. 'Looking for this?' the Duke said, appearing out of the shadows pointing a gun at her in one hand, and holding the letter in the other. 'I thought you knew Winterbrook enough, to know that there are secret passages throughout. You didn't think that there would be one in my study.'

They stood opposite each other, staring into each other's eyes.

He leant across and hovered the letter over her candle, letting it catch fire and then threw it into the fireplace.

'You didn't think I was onto your little plan? Well I suppose you don't have the evidence anymore.'

'I saw her that night, on the floor in the corridor outside here, covered in blood,' Rose said. The Duke gave a momentary look of surprise. 'I know you murdered her. Duchess said as much. That you hated her, hated the lack of control, the money. Told me about the 'accidents' and how you threatened her,' Rose said.

'It doesn't matter what you saw. You doubted yourself and have taken too long. You're an unreliable eyewitness. I think you're forgetting that I'm the one with the gun. I've murdered once, I will not hesitate to do so again. You can join your Duchess under a bed of roses.' He pointed the gun at her head. 'Any last words?'

'Yes, how do you like your whiskey?' Rose asked. Taking advantage of the Duke's confusion, she took the stopper off a decanter next to her and threw the alcohol over him. She threw the candle after it, setting the Duke on fire.

Bang! He managed to fire the gun as he howled in pain, shooting Rose. She grabbed her side in agony and stumbled out of the study before the flames caught her.

Her only goal now was to find Duchess. She made her way to the garden at the back of the manor, hoping somewhere there was a bed of roses. She wandered for what seemed like ages, quickly running out of energy. She went to the fountain in the centre of the overgrown garden and perches on the side. She felt the bullet in her as it burned. Her hands came away soaked in red to match her dress, and she knew she didn't have long to search.

Suddenly, out the corner of her eye, she saw colour in between the hedges made visible by the starlight. She limped over there as

fast as she could and found a rough bed of red roses growing with determination, probably fertilised by what lies beneath.

Rose, with what little energy left, dug with all her might using her bare hands. Digging and digging and digging. It started to rain which made the soil easier to move. Then a speck of white appeared, along with a gleam of ruby.

She had finally uncovered her. Rose cradled Duchess' hand in hers, crying. She brought the bony fingers to her lips, kissing her gently. 'Oh, my love, I'm so sorry,' Rose cried as she slowly fell into oblivion.

SAM GILBERT

Anonymous Anonymous

The bright red balaclava was first to speak.

'I'm Anonymous...'

A circle of masked humans sat on steel folding chairs in the centre of the church hall, all responding with the same two words, in a range of tones from bright and positive to downright miserable.

'Hi, Anonymous.'

Balaclava chose to continue with a glance and a knowing nod.

'... and I've been Anonymous now for nearly 15 whole days...'

The statement was met with enthusiastic claps from around the room. There was a purple and gold luchador mask that even put two pinkie fingers together to give a little whistle. Another, a rubber mask depicting Prince Charles, rhythmically gave applause thumping the seat of their chair with their palm.

'... and, erm, well, it started with this forum online, *shitmovies.net*...'

A few knowing murmurs from the chairs seemed to indicate the site was popular.

'... I was trolled for my posts, all pro-Anonymous, reacted badly... started arguing with them while I was at work...'

'Ere we go.' Three chairs to the left, lowered baseball cap with aviator sunglasses and a bandana tied around the face, chuckled resonantly, bouncing off the church hall doors. Leader of the circle was a hulking giant with full-sleeve tattoos, jeans, red boots and a white tank-top, neatly topped with a cinema-grade Stormtrooper helmet. Stormtrooper was quick to hush up Cap-Sunglasses-Bandana so that Red Balaclava could finish.

'...so yeah, constant trolling, really hurtful stuff sometimes, defending myself while at work, had a mental breakdown... eventually I was fired by my boss...'

Tears started forming in the corners of Balaclava's eye holes amongst some sniffing.

'... it's just easier, isn't it? I don't want to be named *ever* again.'

A short burst of clapping erupted from the other chairs, and then the next figure decided to stand up for their turn. Long and slim, donning a cheap Dracula Halloween mask and speaking with theatricality.

'Hello everyone, my name is Anonymous!'

Various his and hellos jumped through the hall back at them.

'As the regulars amongst us already know, I waited on tables for eleven years in an absolute dump, chain restaurant some of you may know quite well...'

The Bandana-Cap-Sunglasses coughed 'Pizzaroni' before a prompt, silencing glance from the Stormtrooper. Dracula Mask went on.

'Cat-called, harassed, run ragged. Shift leader didn't even care. Moved around to different restaurants, still the same result. *Eleven* whole years. Curse was lifted though, wasn't it? Binned the nametag, left it behind forever.'

Luchador gave an impassioned 'Hear, hear!' before more clapping from everyone.

'Anywho.' Dracula Mask wasn't finished yet. 'I was at the Dentist's this morning, right? Just a regular check-up. Bit of a kerfuffle about me lowering the mask, which is understandable, but then this rude receptionist... and she was like, *so* rude, right, had the cheek to ask me for ID and address, I mean, *come on*, right?'

The church hall's walls pulsed with a resonant collective groan.

'Typical!' called Luchador.

'Standard!' yelled Sunglasses-Bandana-Cap.

'Alright, alright, let's get settled guys, let's settle...'

A tremendous sigh from Stormtrooper followed this attempt to calm everyone. A few seconds before the room officially dampened at Stormtrooper's insistence. The stocky, tattooed mass of muscle then gestured blithely to a smaller figure who sat between Dracula Mask and Tights Head. Impossible to tell, and far be it for anyone to assume, but the waif with a black hood was small enough to be mistaken for a child, the very least a teenager. Sat cross-legged on the chair with fingers furiously picking at their own cuticles, sparkling white trainers trailed up to baggy black jeans and an oversized hooded jumper. The Hood was doing a magnificent job of masking any features with complete darkness.

'A word or two from you, Anonymous?' asked Stormtrooper.

'No...'

came a barely audible whisper from inside the darkness.

'...it's okay...'

The inked hulk sighed again, gently shaking their chrome dome.

'No one will force you to speak, but it is sort of a tradition here that if it's your first time, you say a few words so we can all get to know you just that little bit better.' Stormtrooper had a surprisingly calming, smooth tone to their voice.

'Would it be okay if...'

The hooded one sounded shaky and terrified, and the lack of maturity to their voice aroused suspicions through the group of their actual age.

'No issue, whatsoever. We'll come back to you.'

They all gently acknowledged the nerves.

A figure with a flowery dress, hairy arms and large hands adjusted the tights secured around their skull with long, painted fingernails, flinging the excess material away as if it were a ponytail. Chin-bristles were poking through the lycra.

'So, I'm Anonymous...'

'Hi, Anonymous,' the choir chirped.

‘... and I just wanna say... the amount of freedom I’ve felt, well, since coming to these sessions, it’s just amazing. The boys in the factory now all pretty much leave me alone, I’d even say they might be a bit jealous of me actually. I have such, you know, mystique... Don’t you think that would be an awesome name, actually?’

Everyone, without hesitation, called out a negative response so impassioned the squeaking their folding chairs made was enough to make anyone wince.

‘Settle, please,’ the Leader summoned, almost to immediate silence.

‘Oh right, yeah, of course...’

An embarrassed red rash had formed on Tights Head’s chest, signalling the moment to move on.

Not wanting to seem rude, the next figure waited patiently, wearing a simple clinical face mask beneath large, wire-framed glasses and long, flowing blonde hair. They cleared their throat, holding the hand of the neighbouring chair, whose head was obscured with a lacy bridal veil. Facemask told the group of a youngster who had ignorantly approached and asked directions to the nearest taxi rank, making them all sneer and cry disapproval. Bridal Veil then chimed in with glee that they had finally found a friend whilst lovingly tightening the grip of the neighbour’s hand. They had been jilted at the altar almost 18 months ago and decided to remain unnamed to avoid humiliation. It was then apparent that the whole group had pitched in, aside from the Hood.

‘So, little one,’ started Stormtrooper, ‘when did you decide to become Anonymous?’

The Hood uncrossed their legs and the feet fell flat on the church hall floor, echoing across the hall.

'I think... it might have been... around three weeks ago,' they responded gently.

'Ahhh, I see... you're quite new to the unnamed, then... ' The Hood nodded slowly. '... And did anything happen to trigger your 'rebirth', as some of us call it here? Or was it just maybe a gut reaction?' The Hood sat forward, bringing their hands together, crossing their fingers and leaned their elbows on their lap. This new pose was unexpected and demonstrated an air of urgency and maturity.

'There was a man... he came to live with us... he wasn't that nice. I mean, he was nice at first, giving me lifts on his motorbike to my friend's house and that... It was a cool bike, a blue Yamaha, I think... But then, after a week or so, he was pushing both of us around... he wouldn't give us lifts... in fact, he wouldn't let either of us go out at all... ' The whole room was silent at the little one's tone.

'So, you're Anonymous... because of this man? You don't have to say any more if you don't want to, I realise how hard this... ' Stormtrooper was interrupted.

'Yeah, it sounds pretty traumatic for him, maybe it's time to move on,' piped in Luchador.

'He just turned so nasty, all of a sudden...' the Hood began again. 'My mum, she...' A tear caught in the back of their throat.

'Go on, let it out,' called out Tights Face. 'We're all here for you, now.'

The Hood started weeping gently. Clinical Mask put their arm around Bridal Veil, who had started shaking with sadness underneath the lace.

'My mum hasn't left the house in days... she's just so afraid... '

The swinging doors to the church hall burst open, the creak piercing the tension amongst the chairs. Everyone's masked head darted towards the entrance of the room to inspect who had

appeared. It was a tall, leather-clad figure, with motorcycle boots and topped with a Blue Yamaha motorcycle helmet, which they didn't take off.

'Sorry I'm late,' bellowed the Helmet. 'Traffic was horrendous. What did I miss?'

Had they not all worn masks, jaws would have been visibly agape. The Hood jolted from off the chair and marched right up to the entrance of the church hall. Stopping just short of the still-swinging, still-creaking door and motorcycle boots, the Hood lifted to meet the gaze of the Helmet. The towering Helmet looked down, through the visor, into a hood of pitch black.

'Well, hello there,' muffle-chuckled the Helmet. 'Do you recognise me or something?'

The Hood aimed a strong, straight elbow at the Helmet's groin which sent him doubled over and gasping for air.

'LEAVE ME AND MY MUM ALONE, DAVE!' shrieked the Hood, with as much force as they could muster, before storming out through the same swinging doors.

The Helmet, clutching his genitals with both hands, rolled side-to-side on the floor, groaning in agony. The group of masked humans had gathered around him to fill his peripherals once he could blink away the pain.

'So, Dave, is it?' Stormtrooper cracked his knuckles in preparation for the newest arrival.

GEORGIA GRIFFIN

The Barn

An empty corpse, a barn of lost memories. It stands there at the end of the field, its great wooden frame decaying now. The barn is an open wound, a gunshot to the chest. Everyone thinks it but no one says it, especially the boy's mother.

I remember going in there with all of them. It was a strict rule, the kids must groom and feed the horses prior to eating breakfast, otherwise they'd have to wait until dinner. The animals were theirs, and with that came commitment and responsibilities. As I used to say, 'If you ain't wanna look after em', you ain't gunna have them'. They needed to learn their lesson, nothing in this world is free or easy. There were many days where the warmth of food did not reach their stomachs until late in the evening, more so him than any of the others.

That boy never did anything, I knew he'd never make it in the world until he was taught otherwise. I swore I'd make damn sure my son would learn the true value of hard work, even if it killed him. 'Ain't nothing free or easy,' I said to him.

That's why he signed up. I made him do it.

All I see when I look at the barn now is the stain of the red paint against the white-collar roof and the infection of poppies that attack the surrounding land.

I made that barn from scratch. I said we needed it and that it would best if it was built at the bottom of the field. The boy's mother didn't agree with me, but she never said so. She just wanted to avoid an argument. I made sure that thing was built with the finest craftsmanship I could muster.

Over time, the weather and bullets of rain have punctured a



great big hole in the roof and the whole exterior has rotted to pieces. Some craftsmanship that turned out to be.

The barn seems like a waste now. None of us have gone that far into the field for years.

I often wonder what would've happened if I never built it. The peeling blood-red paint would no longer be a blemish on the horizon, instead it could've been a little cottage. A cottage for him and the wife he never married, and the grandkids he never gave me. Perhaps I wouldn't spend every day thinking about the time I wasted making it, and perhaps I wouldn't spend every day thinking about how much I want to tear that fucking thing down.



JEAN KAWARA

Restless Borders

Victoria Falls would have been the perfect spot for our honeymoon, except I saw this scene of Baywatch on TV that had me pondering the golden stretches of beach and the culminating waves of the Indian Ocean. I finally reserved the magnificent and surreal Victoria Falls as the official future Christmas destination for the Pasipamires on my bucket list. It was just incomprehensible the amount of water that passed by the Victoria Falls daily, and God's wonderful works left me speechless.

I was brought back to reality by my husband rustling in his sleep. I looked over at his sleeping figure and I knew that love had been on my side. His bristly beard had covered his dimples; I smiled in satisfaction as I had always wanted to marry a tall man and Prince was just that. I reckoned he was a demi-god, his brown eyes were like chocolate dipped in milky pools. When he walked he moved like the god Titan commanding the attention of us mortals, his androgynous physique was spellbinding, and his bronzed skin had an eternal glow of youthfulness.

My eyes shifted painfully from looking at my freshly minted husband who was still asleep and was very oblivious to his worshipper. I flipped through our itinerary in excitement; Durban had plenty of things to keep us preoccupied for the next two weeks. There was the Voyage to the bottom of the Ushaka Sea World and the Botanical Gardens, but the main attraction was the golden mile of beach stretching four miles from Blue Lagoon to Addington Beach.

I imagined it would be difficult to find anyone in the bus who was as excited as I was. Prince was adamant of us using the bus from Harare to Joburg, but I insisted that I felt unsafe after seeing

Flight UM331 from the Air Zimbabwe fleet suffer engine failure in mid-air, I could not fathom risking my life especially now that the airline was currently in shambles. We would later connect to Durban at Oliver Tambo with the cheap and over advertised Mango Airlines. The Greyhound luxury coach was sufficient and kept us comfortable.

Earlier on we had passed through the border and, surprisingly, the staff from the South African side had seemed competent and energetic. I had concluded that it was still morning and the buses after us would not experience the same treatment. I managed to cast quick glances around the bus and a Somali couple behind us seemed pensive and lost in their gadgets, amazing how cogitative they were on their phones. On the other side of the bus a group of teenage boys were lost in chatter and excitedly discussing their trip to Joburg for a Chris Brown concert. I chuckled at their euphoric state, and at their age who could blame them, they possessed the future at their fingertips. On the seat in front of us sat a little girl who was looking at me with fresh curiosity as she sat on her mother's lap, I let a smile play on my lips at the cherubic innocence.

I realised how much I needed to freshen up, but getting up from the seat was a struggle as my feet had become numb and had grown accustomed to the stationary position I had held up for so long. Armed with my toiletry bag, I marched to the ladies toilet, luckily there was no one there – and I squeezed my healthy frame into the tiny compartment, carefully not touching the walls. The mirror was the only decent thing as it had perfect lighting.

The soft baby wipes were gentle on my spotless, dewy skin. I had an oval face that was beautifully proportioned, I was really dark but I did not think of ever using skin lighteners. My glasses started to fog up, I realised that I had left the tap with hot water running.

I had the same shade of brown eyes as Prince only mine were smaller and I would squint when I was deep in thought. The bun that I had tied had come undone and as I was looking for a bobby pin to fasten it, a violent explosion erupted, causing the bus to skid and veer off the road, hurling me into the mirror like a torpedo. The bus leapt into the clearing at an impossible speed for the driver to control. The driver jammed on the brakes, the bus span and overturned.

After what seemed like a lifetime, I finally regained consciousness. I faintly opened my eyes and everything seemed so blurry as my glasses were smashed from the impact. The force was so intense that my entire body felt as though it had liquefied. The mirror was shattered and I was covered with slivers of glass which had taken refuge in my soft flesh. I was terrified but there was no pain and I was overwhelmed in pure shock. A sizeable chunk of the mirror was embedded in my right thigh and I bravely decided not to pull it out as I was very much aware that I could bleed to death if it had lacerated an artery.

The screams started to get louder as more people were regaining consciousness. The bus had compacted into a mangled mess and all I could think of whether if Prince was alive in all of this. A scream escaped my lips before my brain could coordinate it. The roof of the bus had been torn off and the pungent smell of burning oil was consuming the air and my eyes were swelling with fresh tears, as I was now fearing the worst. The fear became paralysing as I saw mangled bodies and immediately had an overwhelming urge to throw up. I fell into a fit of uncontrollable sobs as I staggered and clung onto the seat in front of me.

Where was he, was he dead? The build up of these thoughts began to foreshadow my fears. I got up and started pushing away

the dead bodies that were strewn across the aisle. Some of the seats had lodged and merged with the floor of the bus. As I got closer to where we were seated I heard a low groan and my name. I froze and heard it again. I forgot that I had glass in my thigh as I hurriedly fumbled my way through. Hot tears streamed down my cheeks as I saw my husband was still on his seat, bloodied and bruised. A huge gash had been inflicted by the broken seat next to ours.

He started coughing and spluttering as he was losing breath. The engine had caught fire and flickers of flames started licking the engine oil and I knew we had to get out quickly.

The side of the bus where our seats were had sustained minimal damage, but fumes as black as coal started to fill the bus. The Somali couple had suffered few injuries I could see and quickly came to our assistance. The man carried Prince over his shoulders and he kicked the window as it was our only exit. His wife climbed out first, I followed after with some assistance. He started to let my husband out slowly so not to cause extensive damage to his gaping wound and he came out last. Some of the people who managed to escape were screaming and crying and one man had lost his arm and was writhing in agony as he lay in a pool of blood. I saw the little girl who was staring earlier shaking her mother who lay motionless on the ground.

The Somali couple assisted the man who lost his arm and I had to get pressure on my husband's head wound. I tore up my shirt and tied it around his head. I was so relieved that he was alive that I forgot the pain in my thigh, but he stopped me from fussing and looked at my wounds with so much pain in his eyes.

Prince realised the bus was going to explode and starting yelling for people to move away so we moved a few meters away and the bus exploded, releasing a ball of flames that erupted causing

shards of flying metal and a wave of intense heat. I looked back and realised that some of the people who had survived the crash in the bus were burnt to death.

In the distance we saw a group of civilians approaching and were relieved, as we knew that help was surely on its way. As they drew nearer their steps grew more purposeful and upon closer look they were swinging what looked like knives. I caught glints in the sun. Prince stood up quickly and looked at me. These were not friendly faces. We had to run. Everyone got up with their battered and bruised bodies and clumsily started to flee. When they saw us running they started chasing after us and yelling in what I understood as Zulu.

I fell flat on my face as I tripped on thick undergrowth, causing the glass to plunge deeper into my thigh. Prince lifted me up but we were outrun and outnumbered. They surrounded all of us and two large men grabbed me and Prince with such force my arm was nearly torn out of its socket and they shoved my husband with such viciousness that he fell on the ground. I screamed at them to leave him alone.

We were taken back to the scene of the crash where they assembled everyone into a group. Me and my husband were excluded from the group and instead were made to stand away just the two of us, like children in class who had not done their homework. Our captors stood towering over us as we were made to kneel on the stony ground. There were eight men in total who were armed with machetes and a shotgun. One giant, stout man looked like he was in charge as he exuded authority and an air of pompousness.

His voice was deep and barked at us, 'Zimbabweans you will never learn will you? We tell you to stay in your country but you are

stubborn and you come here to take away our jobs, our source of livelihoods, our women and dilute our culture with your cultureless filth.' The other men nodded in unison.

Prince held me close as we realised that this was not just a band of murderous robbers but perpetrators of hate and spite. The animosity that flared in the eyes of those men sickened me. Their leader turned and looked at us and pointed the large shaved barrel of his shotgun at my husband. I gasped and instinctively put my arms and body around him.

The barbarians started laughing and the leader scowled, saying venomously 'Lovebirds.' They sounded like a pack of hyenas with that cruel echoing laugh.

'We don't have time, torch them!' ordered the leader. 'Waste this foreign scum who think this is a land of milk and honey for them. This is hell and rivers of their blood will flow!' The leader turned to us and gave a cruel lopsided smile and walked away saying, 'Mandla leave these two to watch. They will go back to Zimbabwe and tell their countrymen of the carnage that awaits all of them if they ever cross borders. Kill the rest.'

My body shook with terror as I clung with all my might to my husband who also held me tight. The Somali man and woman were rounded up in the group and the little girl was left hugging her dead mother. The boys who were going to the concert were howling and trembling with fear. The beast Mandla took gallons of petrol and doused the group and as some tried to run away they were stabbed with machetes or shot. We screamed in horror as the horrific scenes unfolded. They cried and begged for their lives but those heartless and cruel animals seemed to see it as sport. A single match was lit, engulfing the group in flames. Their screams churned my heart and I felt so much pain that I fainted.

I woke up smelling the familiar stench of medication in the hospital and instantly started screaming. Prince quickly came to me, as he was seated by my side, and calmed me down. I looked at him, he looked so grave in his hospital clothes, heavily bandaged around his head, arm and leg. He had aged, his skin ruddy and weathered. Our hands were the only intimacy we could afford as I was bandaged heavily like an Egyptian mummy. I was cut badly. The doctor came in said how lucky we were and told me my injuries were nothing that good needle work and painkillers could not fix and that I would be on my feet soon.

As he left I felt a wave of pain hit me again in my heart as I remembered the horror and I wept. My husband told me we had been in hospital for 3 days and that I was slipping in and out of consciousness and my wound was infected and I had been in shock. He had sustained minor damage. It had only been a flesh wound that had to be stitched together, to my relief. He turned on the TV and the news about the massacre was widespread on international channels such as CNN and BBC.

On that fateful day a bus carrying 85 passengers was involved in a horrific accident caused by a spike strip thrown in front of the moving vehicle, severely shredding all the tyres. That led to a roadside bloodbath that claimed 60 people on the spot plus 22 who were slaughtered and burnt alive because of the deepened hatred for foreigners. Three people survived the catastrophe, Prince Pasipamire, Gina Pasipamire and a little girl, Nomsa Makoni.

The little girl was Nomsa, I thought to myself. They said we were not survivors because of our choosing but that we were mouthpieces to tell everyone that hate was there and xenophobia came with faces and a nationality. Tears, a new sensation of hate, heartache and sorrow were our honeymoon. I closed my eyes and

gave way to the sweet comfort of morphine, I saw my husband as he blurred away, he was that one thing that confirmed I had love to look forward to through it all.

In loving memory of those who lost their lives in the xenophobic attacks in South Africa in the years 2010 and 2015 as well as those whose lives were not accounted for or documented on all platforms of the media. May you rest in peace.

BEATRIX KONYVES

Truth or Dare

You've just finished a long week at school and it's time for some fun. It's the first invitation you've received for one of Joanna's sleepover parties. You're not really the popular kind so it's obviously a surprise. In fact, Joanna and her friends used to bully you a few years ago before a girl allegedly tried to hook up with Joanna's boyfriend at the time. She lives with her older brother, and he obviously doesn't mind having a bunch of drunken teenage girls around. You spend too much time picking your clothes. You try on each and every one of your t-shirts and trousers and skirts and dresses and jackets. You choose a short, velvet skirt, your Guns'n'Roses t-shirt and a fake leather jacket. You don't put on too much makeup, just a little red lipstick and some eyeliner.

You show up at the party a little late, but Joanna welcomes you with a smile. She's wearing a light blue T-shirt with 'Queen of the Party' written on it and a pair of black leggings. She smells like hair dye, so she must've dyed her hair pink for the party. She shows you to the kitchen. You just brought a bag of crisps because you didn't have time to buy more, but there's plenty of other snacks, tequila, cider, wine, vodka, and all sorts of juice. You help yourself to a full glass – more vodka, less apple. Burns a little. Perfect. You go to the living room where the other girls are and sit down in the circle. They're playing Truth or Dare. The room is a little crowded. There are five girls crammed on a three-seater sofa, Joanna and her bestie are sat in a pink leather bean bag and everyone else is either on the wooden floor or on the white, fluffy, carpet. Your mind is on the vodka and Ron, the guy you've had a crush on for the last couple of weeks. Mostly on Ron. *Truth. What did you. . .? Truth or*

Dare? Go to the bathroom and... Dare. Post a picture on... Beth? You snap out of your Ron revelry when you hear your name. You don't have to think too much about it. 'Truth'. Do you have a crush on anyone in our school? You feel that Joanna is mocking you a little, but that's just in your head. You're sure she just wants to know you better and that's why she asked you. You stutter as 'Ron' rolls out your tongue. Ron? That dubious tall guy who plays the bass in that stupid satanic band? This is awkward... 'Yes, that Ron.' Cute. No rude comment? That's strange. Maybe Joanna didn't invite you to make fun after all.

The girls keep playing. *Truth. Dare. Dare. Truth. Truth. Dare. Truth.* You finish your glass of vodka and fill it up again. It's clear that you're not a favourite of the party – they never pick you. You don't get what the hype is about these sleepovers – the food is totally unhealthy, the alcohol is okay, but most girls are already one step from passing out, and the music is absolutely shit. You have much more fun at a concert with people you've never seen before, drinking the same vodka you're drinking now, but dancing, singing, and listening to some damn good music. So, you keep thinking about Ron. You don't think you're good enough for him. You have boring brown hair, and your mother won't let you dye it some cooler colour like neon yellow or orange. Or maybe you're too skinny or too fat by his standards. Maybe he's seeing someone else, and you've just created a bunch of trouble for him. *Beth? It's your turn! Truth or Dare?* You hesitate a bit. The vodka is making your thoughts a little blurry and you're feeling a little braver, so you think about picking dare, but you're not brave or drunk enough yet. The girls notice that you're taking too long to decide so they start chanting *Dare! Dare! Dare! Scared chicken! Pick Dare! 'Fuck it! Dare.' I dare you to...* You hear Joanna's evil voice. The one that she used to call you a freak. *...text that little crush of yours and ask him out on a date.* You feel your stomach

turning upside down and your vision gets a little blurry. No, it's not the vodka. It's Joanna. Her dare hit you in a soft spot and now all the butterflies are wreaking havoc in your stomach. Your mouth is suddenly dry, and you can't speak. You feel like you're going to puke so you get up and run to the bathroom. You hear the girls laughing at you. It's horrible.

You wash up and go back to the room. It seems as though the girls were not laughing at you after all. They're asking you if everything's alright and offering you a glass of water. You're confused. Are they really nice to you or are they still trying to mock you? They wait until you seem to feel a little better, then Joanna reminds you of your dare. You can't say no. No one said no. Girls had to make out with each other or send nude pictures to random guys, and no one refused. You picked dare so you have to do it. To help you find some courage, the girls decide it's time to do some shots. You quickly empty two tiny glasses of tequila. With all the vodka you've had before, that's enough to make you feel dizzy and emotional, but also brave enough. You look for your phone and find it in the bathroom. You take a moment to look in the mirror and you tell yourself how amazing you are. It's a great opportunity and you shouldn't waste it. After all, what's the worst thing that could happen? Worst case scenario he just says that he doesn't want to go out on a date with you. But if Joanna sees that, you will never hear the end of it. But maybe he will say yes! And then you'll go out on a date, and you'll get along perfectly, and you'll be together and... Okay, you've got this!

The girls are waiting for you. You sit down on the floor, next to Joanna. You look up Ron on Instagram and tap the Message button. The conversation is empty. You type:

Hey, Ron
Wanna go on a date with me?

See, it wasn't that hard! You put your phone away and try to calm down. Your heart is still beating like crazy. It's almost 3 am so he's probably sleeping and hopefully dreaming of you. The girls are getting way too drunk at this point so, one by one, they pass out all over the house – on the sofa, on the floor, in the bedroom, wherever. You find a cosy spot on the carpet, cover up with a random blanket and go to sleep.

When you wake up you've got a ginormous headache and your mouth tastes like crap. As you connect with reality you remember that you're at Joanna's and... last night you texted Ron. You open your phone, and you have 6 notifications on Instagram. Someone mentioned you in a comment, a girl from the party tagged you in a story, you've got some likes on a pic you posted the other day, and you have one unread message.

OMG

This was unexpected

Wow

Yes, sure, I wanna go on a date with you

When are you free?

Table for Two

A tall, brunette woman in her late twenties, with soft light-brown skin, is living the life that her mother always wanted: a house, a car, a loving husband to provide for her. It didn't matter that the enormous house was always empty, the car always broke down and the husband barely spent any time at home. Rebecca lived mostly alone, miles away from any friends or family. Jack had to relocate right after their wedding, he was quickly promoted and started travelling to different cities every month.

Rebecca was a good wife. She woke up early on Wednesday and started cleaning the house cheerfully. She prepared her nicest clothes – Jack was to come home the next day. He's been gone for almost one month and she really missed him. That's why she decided to surprise him with his favourite meal – minestrone soup and beef steak with blue cheese sauce and mashed potatoes. The idea came to her the night before, just before falling asleep, so she had none of the ingredients, except potatoes.

As soon as she finished with cleaning and the whole house was sparkling, Rebecca changed her clothes and ran to the car. She tried starting it once, twice, three times, then went to a bus stop near her house. She didn't mind being all by herself most of the time, but when the car broke down, she wished that she had a man by her side. Jack would have known how to fix it right away, he always did.

The bus was mostly empty, and it only stopped two or three times, so Rebecca reached Sainsbury's in no time. She carefully chose the best-looking steak and vegetables, she bought some cake for dessert, then she looked at all the discounts and put a few more items in her trolley. At checkout, Rebecca was happy to meet with

her friend – an old cashier lady who always liked to chat with her about whatever was going on in the world. It was 7 pm and way too dark outside when Rebecca started home with heavy bags.

It was raining – it was an annoying late-November rain, and the streets were mostly empty. She hopped on a bus and sat down on the only empty seat, next to a strange man wearing a hoodie, sunglasses, and a large scarf that completely covered what was left of his face. Taking her phone out from her pocket, she noticed three missed calls from her husband.

‘Jack, honey! Hello! I’m sorry I didn’t pick up. I was out shopping. Is everything okay?’

‘Slow down, sweetheart. Everything’s fine. I can’t talk too much now, but I just wanted to let you know I’ll have to stay here until Friday...’

‘Oh... Then I guess I’ll see you on Friday... I miss you, darling... The house is so empty without you...’

‘I know. I miss you too. Take care of yourself. See you on Friday.’

Rebecca sat there disappointedly watching the rain fall, she was really hoping that Jack would be home on time at least once. It was stupid of her to think that. She should have known by now that Jack’s boss was an asshole who didn’t give a damn about Jack’s life. Lost in thought, Rebecca almost missed her stop, she pushed the button just in time. When she got off, she felt as if someone was following her, but she dismissed that feeling. She wasn’t the only one to get off the bus and, of course, she wasn’t the only one living in the area. She was definitely watching too many crime documentaries lately. When she was about to open her front door, she heard footsteps approaching rapidly and, before she could get in, a man caught her by the back of her neck and pushed her inside the

house. Hoodie and sunglasses, he was the man from the bus. She wanted to scream, but her voice froze. She tried to defend herself, punching and scratching, telling the man that her husband would be home any time, but what good was it when he knew that Jack wasn't returning? The man dragged her to the kitchen and punched her in the face. The last thing Rebecca saw was him taking off his trousers. Then she fainted on the cold tiles.

When she woke up, she was naked and covered in bruises. There was no sign of the unknown man. She lay there, shaking, not knowing what to do. She could have called the police. But what could she tell them? She had no idea what the man looked like – his face was completely covered. Besides, so many women were not taken seriously when reporting something like this. And then, even if she did call, there would be questionings and policemen around the house, she would have to see doctors, and maybe even go to court. She's seen it in a documentary, it took a long time. Jack was coming home in two days, she had no time for all that. So, instead of calling the police, she faked a smile and called Jack, trying to forget the horrible event. They talked until late at night and his voice made everything seem so far away and unimportant.

After four hours on the phone, Jack hung up and fell asleep, but Rebecca couldn't that night. Everything came back to her every time she closed her eyes. She locked all the doors and checked them every hour or so. What if he came back for another round? She started frantically cleaning the house. She was trying to keep her mind away from it all. Rebecca was hoping that everything would go away when Jack came home. But what was she going to do? She couldn't tell him, it would ruin his stay. He would insist on reporting the incident and then the cops would come and there would

be questionings and court hearings. He would be so angry! What if Jack didn't believe her? Maybe he would think she was having an affair and was just trying to hide it. He would see the bruises. What was she going to tell him? She slipped and fell. That made no sense. What if... What if she was pregnant? She couldn't hide that. Or maybe she could tell Jack it was his kid. They wanted to start trying for a baby anyway. But Rebecca didn't want a baby with this random stranger. She had to tell Jack. He would understand her, and he would buy a new car maybe, one that doesn't break down so often, and she would never ever have to take the bus again in her entire life. No, she could never...

Rebecca was setting the table for two. She was wearing a long red skirt and a black shirt. That was her and Jack's favourite outfit. The food was ready, and every corner of the house was sparkling clean. There was nothing left for her to do now but sit and wait. But all that waiting was overwhelming. Thoughts were racing through her head, bringing back the man, that night... What was Rebecca going to do now? She let out a loud sob and started crying. She needed to cry.

A car pulled up in front of the house. Rebecca wiped her tears and nervously ran to the window. She heard keys jingling and then the front door opened slowly.

'Hello, honey! I'm home.'

CONNOR LONG-JOHNSON

The Happy Husband

The bell rang at ten o'clock in the morning and she opened the door to find a large man in a clean-cut suit standing on the porch inspecting his fingernails and holding a clipboard under his left arm.

'Good morning,' he beamed with a salesman's smile, 'I assume that you are Mrs Mary Finney?'

'Yeah, I am,' she said, shrugging her shoulders dismissively, 'and who's askin?'

'My name is Mr Carpenter, and I'm here to offer you an incredible opportunity the like of which you will not find anywhere else. I—'

'Whatever it is you're selling I'm ain't interested.' She moved to close the door and get back to her workout.

Later that day, Mary and her husband Steve sat down to eat dinner. Steve, playing with his food – try to twist the half-cooked spaghetti around his fork until it fell off – and looking intently down at his phone, asked her about her day.

'Nothing much happened, except for some idiot interrupting my yoga session. Fat, with a shit eating grin, a proper salesman type.'

'He's not eating *again*,' she thought. She cursed the oven that had become so unreliable in its old age. She had vowed to go into town next week to see if there were any newer models on sale.

'What was he selling?'

'Couldn't tell you, I shut the door on him straight away.'

'Interesting you should mention that,' Steve said, continuing to look down at his plate. 'I received a call at the office today from a Mr Carpenter.'

‘Yep, that’s him.’

‘He told me that he might swing by the house this morning with a proposition for you.’

‘For me?’ I asked, now curious.

‘Yes, he sounded rather insistent. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever heard someone so confident of their own services. I assume he’ll be back tomorrow. You should hear what he has to say. You never know, it might be worth your while.’

‘Sure,’ she agreed.

‘Why not?’ she thought to herself. ‘We might be able to save on some new furniture, or get an upgrade on the crappy internet package.’

Searching for more to distil the silence, she poked him for more details about work.

‘Shit, Rod keeps moving deadlines and making life a pain in the ass for everyone.’

‘Oh.’

There was a pause.

‘I’ve been looking at obstetricians.’

‘Steve, I really don’t think – ‘

‘There’s a good one in the city that charges a modest fee. I think we should book an appointment.’

‘I’m not sure if that’s something we need right now.’

‘Isn’t it? Rod’s just had his second, and Brad’s wife is expecting twins next year.’

‘Michelle is pregnant?’

‘Yeah, she is, so are the Davidsons next door and the couple who own the Deli.’

‘Steve, we’ve only been trying for a couple of months. You gotta give it some time.’

'No, Hun, we haven't. We're regular as clockwork and something, anything should have happened by now. Not even one late Monthly Visitor in a year and a half.'

'I don't want to talk about this right now.'

Steve continued. 'So, I've been searching around, and I've found this app.' He turned his phone towards her so she could see what he had been looking at. 'It's called EggTimer and it'll help you to track your monthly cycle. You download it and feed it regular data about your period. That way, we'll know when we have the best chance of conceiving.'

'No way. There is no bloody way I'm putting information about that on my phone.'

'Well why not?'

'Why not? Download that app and let every wormy little hacker nerd know when I'm on the rag? No effing way!' She shook her head vigorously. Her voice quivering, she pushed back on her chair, got up and cleared their plates from the table.

Steve scrunched his face in distaste as he always did whenever she said something particularly vulgar.

She stood at the sink, wringing the towel tight in her hands and biting down hard on her lips as she felt the tears being to swell in her eyes.

Meanwhile, Steve climbed the stairs two at a time and went into the bedroom, the door making a loud bang as he entered. Sliding a copy of *Ebony Babes* out from underneath the socks in his drawer, he unbuckled his belt and set himself down on the bed, sighing.

Just as her husband had predicted, at 10 o'clock the next day, Mary's yoga session was interrupted again by the ringing of the

doorbell. There he stood, with a beaming smile of pearly whites and his clipboard secure under his arm.

‘Mrs Finney—’

‘I know you’ve spoken to my husband, what is it you’re trying to push on me?’

‘I promise you Ma’am your husband will be delighted when he sees one of our gifts in your home. May I come in?’

‘What is it exactly you’re selling?’

‘I’m sorry.’ He held his hands up in apology. ‘Allow me to start again, I represent an organization that specialises in gentleman’s gifts. We’re known as Happy Husbands.’

‘Never heard of ya.’

He continued as if he had not heard her.

‘We are a large but humble company who keep ourselves low to the ground. We offer women bespoke gifts for their husbands that are tailored to perfection. No large advertising campaigns, billboards and YouTube ads. Just a few salesmen with a mission to make America’s husbands happy again. We offer anything that we think will make a man’s life greater, from new cars to kittens. Heck, we even offered one man’s wife a cabin by Lake Michigan.’

She stood there, her eyebrows raised. ‘What the hell is this crap?’ she thought. Eventually, she spoke. ‘And how does this work?’

‘It’s quite simple really. I come into your home and, with your permission of course, take a tour of the place. I come in, have a look around and find out all I need to know. Then I make my assessment and suggest that one item is removed from the house and replaced with something newer, more beautiful, or more functional.’

‘You mean you suggest the gift?’

‘Ah, yes,’ he said, wiping sweat from his brow. ‘And this is the catch; it’s not in the small print as we have to tell you up front—’

‘What is it?’ She tapped her foot impatiently.

‘You see, we don’t tell you what the item is either. That way, on that special day when your gift arrives, you and your husband can both share in the glory of the surprise. All I can promise you is that when we’re finished, your husband will be left smiling.’

‘If this slob thinks he is getting into my house that easily he’s a bigger idiot than I think,’ she thought.

Enough was enough; she needed to get this guy to leave her alone. ‘Well, Mr Carpenter. As great a pitch as that was, I think I’ll give this one a miss.’

He maintained the picturesque smile and told her not to worry. Before he turned to leave, he placed a card in her hand and asked her to call the number on it should she ever change her mind. ‘Do not hesitate to give us a bell if you change your mind!’

Shutting the door, she felt the sudden urge to urinate and went upstairs, leaving fingerprints on the dusty banister as she went. After she was finished, she walked past the empty nursery.

Painted with neutral colours, white, lemon and a touch of pale green, Steve had finished the room over a year ago, about a month after their honeymoon. They had made love at least once a week since their wedding and Mary had been convinced that before long the pitter patter of tiny feet would fill the house and her heart with joy. They had both overflowed with passion then. For the first month of their marriage, she had been hypnotised by Steve’s virility. She could barely keep up with him, just following along as he overcame her. Their love making would leave her exhausted, huffing and panting on all fours like a dog.

Yet, while she decided to implement an exercise routine, the novelty of her body had seemingly worn off, and Steve's desires were limited to one or twice per week, still more than enough to deliver the ultimate gift for them both.

But the room remained empty.

'One day soon. I promise, one day soon,' she told herself, rubbing her stomach as she looked at the desired place for the crib

They hadn't been checked yet; she was far too afraid of having some doctor wag his tongue at her and steal her womanhood away in one swift sentence. But still no baby had come. They lived in hope. Hope that Baby Nelson or Baby Alice would make their presence known soon, making up for lost time and changing their lives forever.

She felt as if she were in a living séance. Day by day, trying to commune and waiting for a message from the beyond. Not a message from the afterlife, but a sign from that even more wonderful and mysterious cosmic sphere, from before life itself.

But she had felt nothing.

With a sigh, she headed back downstairs to the comfort of her yoga mat, wiping the dust from the rail with a sweep of her right hand.

It was halfway through another workout when the YouTube video she had been exercising to crashed and she decided to browse the internet.

She closed the previous tabs; Steve had been researching local obstetricians again. 'He must be compiling a list of every reputable doctor he could find within 100 miles,' Mary thought. 'If only Carpenter could find us a decent doctor,' she mused.

After reading the latest fashion and celebrity gossip, she decided to look up Happy Husbands and was directed to their homepage.

The page was littered with pictures of men in suits – some of Carpenter – standing with other more casual men and women outside homes and donning toothy grins.

She scanned the page with her eyes and clicked on the TESTIMONIALS tab.

She was met with more photos and quotes from happy customers.

‘My husband has never been happier with his new toolkit.’

‘I couldn’t thank the wife enough when they delivered the Mercedes to the driveway.’

She shuffled forward, getting closer to the screen.

‘Happy Husbands does exactly what it says on the tin.’

‘Simply brilliant!’

After some further investigating, she found the company to be registered, and over thirty years old. Everything looked perfectly legitimate and the people in the photos looked so *happy*. She hadn’t seen Steve smile like that since their wedding night when she entered the marriage bed for the first time, her body a drug he was about to try for the first time.

She raised an eyebrow. ‘Interesting,’ she thought.

She flipped the card through her fingers as the dial tone droned on and was ready to hang up when the phone crackled.

‘Is this Mr Carpenter?’

‘Yes, this is he. Who is asking?’

‘This is Mary Finney. I think I wanna have you come round and get me a gift for my husband.’

She heard his breath down the phone, like panting, followed by a thank you.

He congratulated her on making a wise decision and made an agreement with her that 11am the next day would be the most suitable time for a house call. He looked forward to seeing her then.

She hung up the phone, and exhaled with satisfaction.

That night when Steve came in from work, she gave him a squeezing hug and took off his coat, hung his hat on the peg and greeted him with a plate of charred meatloaf at the kitchen table.

'I'm going into town in the next few days to look for a new oven,' she said. 'Damn thing hasn't been right for months.'

Without a word, he sat and poked his food with a fork.

She sat across from him, one hand lifting chunks of food to her mouth and the other drumming fingers on the table.

Steve looked up. 'What has you so excited?' He was chewing harshly, his cheeks rising and falling in great waves as his jaws worked at the meatloaf.

'Oh, nothing, just started a new exercise routine today and it's got me pumped up.'

He looked up at her and raised an eyebrow.

'You spoke to Carpenter again today didn't you.'

She huffed in anger; she had never been able to lie to him. It was probably what had held them together; their honesty.

'Yes,' she said, embarrassed and schoolgirl like. 'He's coming around tomorrow at 11 o'clock.'

'Should I be excited?'

'Yeah. I think you should.'

Her yoga mat and trainers lay lonely in the corner on the morning of Carpenter's visit. Mary instead moved from room to room, dusting ceilings, wiping down tables, removing the excess wax that

was forming at the bottom of the candle holder and straightening the pillows on her couch. When the cleaning was done, the cloth was so grimy that she threw it into the bin.

By the time Carpenter arrived, she had built up a sweat running from room to room. The only thing Mary had forgotten to do was use the air freshener, so when he knocked, there was still the smell of that morning's burnt toast clinging to the air.

He stepped over the threshold and took off his hat. Mary took it from him and hung it on the peg next to Steven's.

His greeting was interrupted by a sneeze which made Mary's cheeks redden.

The tour, or 'Assessment' as Carpenter called it, lasted only half an hour. He searched every room in the house, holding a clipboard and iPad in hand and making only occasional scribbles at great speed.

She followed him like an eager child, trying to peer over his shoulder and get a glance at whatever he was writing. The words were illegible; she thought it might be shorthand.

He walked through the lounge and kitchen checking all four corners of every room. His eyes were hawk like and intense, searching for the smallest details. He could have seen a torn fibre on the curtains, or a lonely speck of dust floating in the sunbeams.

When he came to the nursery, he stopped and put his hand on the edge of the door, rubbing the soft wood thoughtfully.

'May I go in?'

She paused, thinking it through. He didn't need to see the nursery, after all what did their kids – or lack thereof – have to do with a gift for her husband?

'I'd rather that you didn't.'

'Of course,' he said, bowing his head. 'Do you have any children?'

‘Not yet, but we hope to have soon, very soon. I don’t like to give it too much thought, to be honest. My mother always told me and my sisters that what will be, will be.’

‘How wonderful.’ He scribbled down more notes on the clipboard furiously.

As they descended the stairs, the assessment almost over, Carpenter congratulated her on the wonderful home she had built and excited her with the news that he had the perfect gift in mind.

‘I promise you that when your husband comes in from work tonight, he will sit down as the happiest man alive and I must say, I think the gift that your husband deserves will be one of the greatest we have ever facilitated. In fact, in our 30-year history I’m not sure we have ever done anything as ambitious as what I plan to do for you.’

She bit her lip. ‘What is it?’ Many thoughts raced about the potential gift. A swimming pool? A trip to London?

‘All will be revealed soon, but first we must settle payment and agree to some terms and conditions.’

‘Ok,’ she said, swallowing. Her heart was thudding, and she was drumming her fingers again, this time against her waist.

‘The total combined fee is—’

He checked his iPad as her heart continued its quickening beat, ‘\$2499.99.’

She felt her heart drop at the sound of his voice uttering the numbers. Two and a half grand?! She must be crazy for considering this. That was almost all of her severance package that she had stashed in her drawer. A wave of panic washed over her as she thought through the decision.

But Steve worked hard, put up with shit at home and at work, and always managed to make her happy. She had given him so much

stick over the whole baby situation, maybe she would download the EggTimer, and maybe she would accept Carpenter's offer.

But twenty-five hundred? That was most of her savings gone. What if she got pregnant? Instead of a head start on college savings or clothes or a cute stroller, her husband might have a remarkable gift and she nothing to show for it, no insurance if something terrible happened, no independence, no safety net to protect her if she fell from the fine ledge of modern life. And she couldn't ask Steve for the money. What sort of wife would she be, buying her husband a gift with his own money?

In the end, the mental image of her and Steve, standing outside the house with Carpenter as happy, satisfied customers posing for their photo soon to be plastered all over the Happy Husband's website won out.

'Okay, I'll take it.'

'Excellent! You've made the right choice I assure you.' She could see Carpenter's shoulders relax somewhat as he handed over the iPad. She looked down at the screen which said TERMS AND CONDITIONS. 'If you could just scroll down and sign and date at the bottom of the page for me.'

'Sure.'

She scrolled down, her fingers exercised as she zoomed through pages and pages of litigious nonsense. She ignored line after line of as they merged into a black and white blur. Too excited at the idea of making her husband happy again to bother reading through anything.

She finally came to the bottom of the page where she found the line and date. She paused, biting her lip.

She signed herself with her finger. Mrs Mary Louise Finney.

As she did so, she felt the briefest chill as she shuddered, like a sudden rainstorm on a July afternoon. It came and went in a second.

‘There you go.’ She passed the tablet back to Carpenter.

‘Thank you, Mrs Finney, you’ve made an excellent choice.’

‘I hope so.’

‘Your order should be delivered within the next seven to ten days. If there are any questions, please, feel free to give me a call.’

With that, Carpenter thanked her again, smiled, took his hat from the peg and bid her a good day.

A week later, with Steve’s gift yet to be delivered, Mary was returning from town having browsed the electronics store for a new oven.

The longer Steve’s package took to be delivered, the more her hopes slipped away like the late evening light. Whatever was coming wasn’t that extravagant; it certainly wasn’t an oven or a car. If she were honest with herself, she doubted if there really was a Happy Husbands after all. She was an everyday sucker, and that fat bastard Carpenter had taken her for a Hell of a ride with a fake smile and an elaborate hoax.

She was shocked, then, to discover an eighteen-wheeler parked outside their home as she walked down the street towards the house. A bald man was sat in the cabin reading a paper and standing beside the truck with his iPad in hand was Carpenter, bellowing with laughter as he stood with Steve shaking his hand vigorously. From here she could see Carpenter’s smile, genuine this time, the white of his teeth shaming the clouds above him.

As she came closer, she managed to get a look in the back of the truck. There were several large boxes stacked one behind the other, each around six foot in length and two in width from what she could gather. The boxes were wooden, with foam stuffed inside that was spilling out onto the floor of the vehicle.

Styrofoam.

Whatever was inside these boxes was delicate, and valuable. Maybe they had brought her a new oven after all, a big double gas oven with an overhead grill based on the size of the boxes.

As she crossed the road to the house Steven went inside, walking as if powered by springs with a bounce in his step. Mr Carpenter saw her and turned to greet her with a tip of his hat.

'Well, would you like to see what your money paid for Mrs Finney?'

'Certainly, Mr Carpenter.' She gestured and took him inside.

As she crossed the threshold the smell hit her. It was cake, cinnamon and sugar with marzipan. It wafted towards her, massaging her nostrils and blanketing her with a shoal of warmth. It reminded her of a childhood spent baking with her sisters in their mother's tiny kitchen apartment. She continued into the house, turning into the living room adjacent to the kitchen and was surprised at what she saw.

There was no new oven. It was the same, white but faded beige with time and dirt.

She moved closer, confused, and then stopped.

The woman almost glided across the floor, the hemline of her dress brushing against the tiles. She did not seem to walk on feet, instead she hovered, an enchanted beauty from a childhood fairy tale. Her dress the colour of rubies, the bodice clung to her, giving her a rotund figure and exaggerating her hips and buttocks. She was humming pleasantly to herself. As she raised a dark hand to the oven, she slowly turned at the dials and knobs with a careful grace, like a mother attending to her child.

'Who the fuck is thi...'

She felt a cold waterfall of dread pour over her as Steve, her husband of over a year, came up behind this mysterious woman

swaying and grabbing onto her hips. She heard him plant a wet kiss on the nape of her neck as if she were his own wife. Then he moved his hand to her buttocks, giving them a firm squeeze.

‘That smells great honey.’

She turned, staring at Carpenter.

‘What the hell is going on here?’

‘Exactly what you agreed to, Mrs Finney.’ The smile was gone now, his face stoic, his lips thin and his eyes blank.

‘Upon payment and signature of the document here,’ he brought up the terms and conditions on his iPad, ‘you agreed that Happy Husbands LLC were permitted to do anything within their power to ensure the happiness of the household’s husband. Including the removal and replacement of individuals within said household.’

She gazed down at the black and white lettering which began to merge into a whirlwind of fuzziness as hot tears formed in her eyes.

From behind the tears, she could just about manage to read the documentation, it confirmed Carpenter’s dreadful words, and just below that, her signature.

‘Did you honestly think that your husband was happy with a woman who could not even, in the months and weeks since her wedding day, bestow upon her husband the inimitable gift of fatherhood? I think not.’

A blazing wave of anger washed over her like molten steel as she thought more about what was happening.

She had paid for this. She paid for her own damn replacement.

More tears formed in the corners of her eyes as she bowed her head. She noticed Carpenter’s iPad; she was just like that iPad now. She had been good for a year or two and now, her husband, tired of what he had, a tool that just wasn’t doing it anymore, had been gifted a shiny new model to play with.

The maelstrom of anger, fear and confusion that had been swelling inside her came to a blinding climax of lightning rage as she made for the woman who had stolen her place in the world.

'I'll fucking kill you!'

Before she could make it across the floor, a heavy hand wrapped around her waist and hoisted her into the air. The truck driver, bald and almost seven foot in height, had her in his grip.

As she was dragged screaming from the house and put into one of the coffin-like boxes in the back of the eighteen-wheeler, the last thing she remembered as the darkness enfolded her was seeing Steve and Carpenter, shaking hands again, Carpenter's arms around her now former-lover's shoulder and turning to pose for a photograph.

Then, shaking his hand one last time and stuttering like a child, she watched as Steve thanked Mr Carpenter with a bear-like embrace and then turned, lifting his new wife into his arms, carrying her through the door and up the stairs to their new bedroom, giggling as they went.

KLAUS LISTER

The Fall

(after James Joyce and Gertrude Stein)

Today, not tomorrow, morn and mourning may crush, cruel and crackling, cackling and fracking, lacking and fucking, fucking, fucking – fuck tomorrow. A question hung and spilling rum and no, so and so. You know not what rots but what grows and you know what grows but not what rots but what grows, you grow beautiful, and so and so, and so, and so and so. And so – fuck tomorrow.

Today, not tomorrow; tomorrow won't exist. Tomorrow won't exit, infinite, timeless, world of the mindless rolling, tumbling, kaji, oyaji – *why, that must mean that* – kaji, oyaji, noise and no, no and no, no, and so, so and so.

Today, not tomorrow, red and rouge (blood and bruise), blossom under the nightlight of moonlight, a cool blue but you still appear red, red, red, you read red as red but I told you, I told you – *din javla idiota*. Times wasted on the colour, red is read as red when red means rum, liquor and licking, nicking the nipple to a point – which is – what? – What is the –

Today, not tomorrow, you is red. Not read, red, pouring, but read? Nothing. You will read red as red, read read as red, read read as reed while the pond grows red. Red pond, red blood, read poetry to a duck. 'Crack, whack, what are they saying to you?' 'Quack, quack.' (*rough translation: What does – why does – the point –*)

The fall (the fall where I felt red read my soul, the kaminari crash, the cackling hush) planted itself into every day, today and tomorrow, and surely the day after, the day after, and so on, and so, and so and so. Roots reel through the upturned earth of my brain, churning through the burning goo. Sucking seductively

the nutrients from the stem, the spine, the electrolytes, the rose blooms, sings and hums of him and rum, oh, sing and hum for me, my love. Or don't.

Tomorrow, silence will fall, cruel, crackling and cackling, frackling and lacking, fucking, fucking, fucking – fuck tomorrow.

HARRY LORRAINE

The Library At The End Of The Universe

Three men woke up from cryostasis. The first to wake up was an elderly gentleman who practiced as a shaman. The next two to awaken were a young aspiring astrophysicist, and a middle-aged spaceship engineer.

They woke up to notice that they were on a spaceship, at the end of time, orbiting the last star in the universe. Surrounding the crew was a library of books, hosting the greatest works of humanity.

They were awoken because there was ten minutes left before the last star in the whole universe died. The AI on board thought it would be dignified to let these men say goodbye to the universe.

The team were a part of a core directive, stretching across billions of years of time, that colonised galaxies, and branched out across the universe. But as stars started to squeak out of existence, so did parts of the colony. The galactic community thought it would be a good idea to send off people, technologies and information into the dimmest parts of the universe to preserve them. This was in case they survive the end of time, in case they get to see the birth of it again, and in case something spectacular happens.

The crewmates discussed the universe; debating what they thought would happen next, and what their favourite times of the universe were.

The physicist said his favourite moment was when humanity cured death. He thought it was deeply poetic that death became a ritual part of peace and spirituality and not an abrupt end to an unfinished story. Death became more meaningful when the participant got to choose when it occurred. This solved a lot of

the dominance problems and political insecurities that plagued humanity for so long.

The engineer said his favourite moment was when humanity learnt the ability to engineer consciousness. This allowed people to talk to planets, stars and matter itself. How incredible he thought it was to learn first-hand from matter, how connected we all are, in that the self was just an illusion. He found it funny how polite nature was, in allowing us to see what it had created. The engineer loved the idea that the universe created itself just to see itself.

The shaman said his favourite moment was way back on earth, before all the technological advancements started to happen. He recalled a state of living that was true and meaningful as it was tied to survival, and therefore suited the true nature of being. He thought this stage of humanity was beautiful as there was no hint of ego, validation or power.

They shared a drink and started to predict what they thought would happen next. They argued about how there was no stuff, and then there was stuff, and finally, there would be no stuff again. They struggled to link it to any ideas of monotheism or any known theories of physics.

The physicist proposed that after the final star dies, time will stop, there will be no matter, and thus will be the end of everything. The universe will transition to a state comparable to death.

The engineer proposed that after the final star dies, the universe will birth again and that the crew will be first-hand observers of the birth of everything. This idea didn't trouble the engineer as he felt that even if they all died in the explosion, it was still an incredible honour to see the birth of being itself.

They looked at the shaman and asked him what he thought would happen next. 'I generally don't know,' the shaman said. The

other two kept persisting him to give an answer, but the shaman decided politely to pass the question over to the final remaining star.

The star told the crew how privileged it felt to be the last star in the universe, and how it felt honoured to supply life and be able to live. The star was grateful in the grandest sense for being alive at all.

The crew asked the star what it thought would happen after it died.

The star replied 'I think we best let the universe decide that one, I don't think it's been too wrong in its own decisions so far. If it feels the time is right for a world of nothing, then let that be. But if the universe has another composition to tell, I'd happily end my life so others can hear it.'

As the star slowly started to die out, the crew shared some home-brew that had been frozen for millennia. The crew said goodnight to each other and watched as the great black took over everything.

PETRA PALKOVACSOVA

I Remember

I remember knowing what he was trying to do that day. I don't remember being ten. I remember the floral dress I was too proud of. I remember how small the zoo club was. I remember the turtles, spiders and mice. I don't remember they had to watch. I remember the smell of wood shavings. I don't remember his sweaty palms. I don't remember counting his pimples. I don't remember how greasy his hair was. And I don't remember the pressure I felt against my body. I remember knowing and not knowing what it was. I don't remember when he covered my mouth. I remember when she yelled, 'She is not old enough for that!' I remember how I shivered in her arms. I don't remember being ten.

I remember how weird they felt when I wore a suit. I don't remember all the comments on my ginger hair. I don't remember how they made me hate my grades. I remember going to a pub. I remember the bitter taste of beer I always loved. I remember counting the minutes until I finally kissed her. I remember how beautiful she was that night. I remember what happened in the white bathroom. I remember how she giggled when I told her to keep her black satin bra on. I remember liking it too much. I remember sliding one of my fingers inside her. Then another, I remember. I remember her angelic moans. I remember leaving heaven.

I don't remember what I tried to do. I don't remember trying twice. I remember not being aware of Plath. I don't remember the Zepter knife and its black handle. I don't remember the bottle of sweet, fragrant rosé for £1.59. And I don't remember all the pills in my small plastic bag. I remember the message my blue-haired boy sent me without knowing it could save my life. I remember him



asking how I felt. I remember when he said he cared. I remember putting the knife down. I remember burying the pills in a brown rubbish bin in my mum's kitchen. I remember listening to Rock'n' Roll Suicide and laughing at that title. I don't remember finishing the wine.

I remember how beautiful Prague is. I remember the green top of Petrin hill. I remember him saying it was mine. I remember the small blue butterfly that had almost drowned in my Budweiser. I remember telling him he didn't have to sleep on a sofa. I remember being too tipsy to move. I remember a kiss from my blue-haired boy on my cheek. I remember he did nothing more. I remember how unreal it feels to fall asleep in your best friend's arms. I remember how uncertain he was when he kissed my lips the next day. I remember how rapidly his heart was beating, and I know it still is...



MARIANA SANTOS PINHO

Divergent

Today was an unusual day. The birds didn't sing at the break of dawn. The sun was unsure of itself, unsteady and shy, not knowing whether to warm me or leave me with yesterday's darkness. The cherry blossoms cried for light and weren't pleased with the playful wind. I'm always happy with a breezy day; it calms me. And if I get a dry day instead, I can always rely on the chilly spring nights. My ears stretched in search for those winged animals' melodies, that help anyone to meditate with nature, but other unwelcomed noises got in between us. The way their tongues vibrated and echoed inside me, made my eyes travel over the same frame window, questioning if I missed something they were trying to say. I envy them and their irrational living, away from us. The sun greeted the flowers and me one last time, and it could reach my heart, even though I was far from its shine. And as the rays faded one by one, I welcomed the perpetual twilight.

Peculiar

One day, I found another bruise. Sometimes I'm able to remember when I bump into something and if it will either leave a mark or not. But when I don't, it's more intriguing. I usually investigate its colour and pattern, where it might have come from and if it hurts when I move or touch it. And when I do so, I enjoy it excessively. That ecstasy feeling makes me wonder the obscure reasons behind it. It is accurate to say this is no standard way of living. The reasons for that are as simple as how easy bruises are. How effortlessly it is to identify where the ache comes from just by looking at it or by touching. I wished all pain was detectable like that. However, this invisible pain I feel is hard to prove, and so much harder to heal. No magic cream can pull that agony to the surface and expel it out of my body. Or out of my mind. And so, without any mythical potion, I focus my energy on the only pain I can caress and fix.

The Unforseeable

Everyone has spoken so far in these group sessions, except me. I know all about them, and I know I need to speak, but after going through the same thing for the third time, you start to get angry and really see how unbelievably pointless all of this is.

'I'm sorry to ask again Megan. . . But do you want to speak today?' Caitlin interrupts my line of thought. She is scared of me, and it hurts to know that. Should I give her something today? Am I even ready?

'Yes,' I finally answer. I could see the surprise and relief in her eyes.

'Thank you, Megan.' She gives me the floor.

'If you gals don't mind.' They nod their consent as I insisted on staying seated.

'Hi, I'm Megan. After being pregnant for eight months, I still couldn't believe it. I would look in the mirror and I was seeing everything we ever wanted finally happening. After so much suffering. But, when I reached those thirty-two weeks I was more scared than ever. I was feeling odd. My husband was and still is so supportive about it, always understanding where my fear was coming from. Yet, he didn't know what was happening and neither did I. But something was there, telling me to be scared. After a few days of low-key fights, he finally told me that my best friends were throwing me a surprise baby shower. He did manage to get me out of my own head, and truly enjoy that special day with everyone. I was then excited and more talkative with my belly, but that worry was in the back of my mind, lurking. . .'

I stop for a catch of breath and a sip of water.

'The baby shower was amazing. It wasn't the gifts that brought me joy, but the tears in everyone's eyes holding back, to stop me from

criing. I could feel their happiness for me with a simple squeeze on my shoulder. It was one of the most emotional days of my life. In that same evening, we cried ourselves to sleep. And it was the only night I could ever sleep embraced to John while pregnant.'

I pause while inspecting all eyes on me.

'But the next very morning, was the opposite. That fear that I had on the back of my neck was no longer there, but all over my body instead. I was sitting in bed for a handful of minutes trying to figure out what my instincts were trying to tell me for the past two weeks. I couldn't put my finger on it and the panic was growing and growing and it all just became so overwhelming. And then I remember to caress my belly, my baby. And it was then that I realised. I felt it... Or rather, didn't. I didn't feel him anymore. I couldn't feel my baby inside of me. And as a tear rolled down my face, I was watching flashbacks of my last two miscarriages. But this time I didn't know what to do. I had an almost full-grown baby inside of me. I was already mourning the little creature I wasn't feeling but that could still be alive. I needed to make sure. With little hope, I gradually started to call John's name, increasing the tone but never fully yelling. When he reached the room he could see the ghost in my face, or my stomach I wasn't sure, and he froze. I still wonder if he actually saw the ghost of our dead son just floating on top of me. With the restricted vocabulary that my brain provided me at the time, I tried to explain him what had happened in the last thirty minutes and acted so quickly. Everything had been in the car since the fifth month, so he only needed to get me to the hospital. It was like watching a movie happen with me as a main character but with no dialogue. Or movements. As soon as we hit the road, he was already on a speaker call with our doctor, who didn't say much – and what she did say didn't sound at all relaxed.'

Another sip of water is in order. When I stop, it's only because I hate monologues. But their eyes pressure me to continue.

'I thought I was going to be in the hospital the whole day just wanting to be seen, but as we were reaching the front doors, the doctor was waiting for us. It only confirmed the emergency neon sign that was blinking in my head ever since that touch. He immediately sent us to an observation room to do an ultrasound. And I looked at the screen and saw him. My baby. Swimming inside me. But after a few seconds, I noticed complete silence. No rapid heartbeat. Simply, no heartbeat. The doctor awkwardly delivered the official news to John and I: our baby was stillborn.'

My voice cracks as I finish the sentence. The woman on my right gives me a touching squeeze on my leg.

'And the world fell underneath our feet. We wanted to mourn each other's loss, but hugging wasn't enough. The doctor gave us a mere couple of minutes before telling the worst news a mother could have. He told me... He told me that in these situations the baby still has to be delivered. Either naturally or induced. I had to deliver my dead son. How was I supposed to do that? What was natural about that? He told me I could have some days to think about it, but I was so outraged that I only wanted to be done with it. I wanted him out of me, and I wanted to see him. John supported every feeling and decision I made, and I am so grateful for him. The doctor left us in the room for about an hour, but my mind was made up. I was having the baby that day. And I did. It was the most painful feeling and distressed moment I ever faced, and my heart broke to a million pieces when I saw my departed son and felt him one last time in my arms. Just the thought of him not having breathed for a single second...'

I finally burst into tears, falling on the floor.

JESSIE ROBINSON

I Used To Write

I used to write. Oceans would pour out of my chest and splash chaos onto a notebook. I used to write of a place so dark that finding the light to pick up my pen was so close to a miracle it felt I'd met God.

I used to write about the pretty girl, with the tentative eyes and the delicate taste on her lips as they met mine. But that taste turned sour when there was no more pretty girl. There are no longer any tentative eyes to gaze into, and the only flavour left on my tongue is bitter. I used to write. I used to write about a life where I, with my bare hands, dug myself out of the rut I had been in for as long as I can remember. And where I built a ladder and got out of this town. I used to do a lot of things. I used to write a lot of stories. I used to cry a lot of tears.

I used to write. Poetry about dark clouds and sleepless nights and the never-ending pit, sitting in my stomach.

I stopped writing. There wasn't any other way I could find to write, and I felt like I wasn't going to survive much longer. I couldn't make my sadness poetic anymore. I couldn't write about the pretty girl because she had left. I ran out of oceans to spill. My soul dried up and around me, I formed a shell of the tranquil and soft person I used to be.

I am 21 years, 5 months, 27 days, 2 hours, and 28 minutes old, and I still feel like I'm drowning. Some days, the ocean inside of me builds up and swallows me whole. Other days, I wash up on the shore, dust the sand off my clothes, and do my best to tighten my grip. I always get back up. I no longer allow the waves to consume me, and I am no longer as dull and dry as I was when the ocean left.



These days, I am autumn. I am blowing the cobwebs off my past and preparing for all that lies ahead. There might not be a pretty girl to come home to, or suffocating darkness to write about. Or not even write that much. Because I might not need to write about brighter days that may lie ahead, as I'm too busy seizing the power I hold over the current ones.

I have truly found a state of serenity in this life.

Perhaps I never met God in the dark when writing. Maybe, I just caught the light shining off a mirror in the distance, begging me to notice that after years of waging war on myself, I was finally at the end of the tunnel. And I was the only one who held the light out of it all along.



HOLLY ROFF

Ninety-Seven Percent

The pub door swung shut behind me, taking with it the sound of revellers still enjoying themselves inside. I stepped out onto the street and shivered, the chill of the night already prickling my bare legs.

My entire body ached. I'd been on my feet all day at work and had been at the pub since I'd finished work seven hours ago. It was nearly midnight now, and I was beginning to think the three-inch heels were a poor choice of footwear.

Kate had left an hour ago to meet some other friends at a bar further into town, but Hannah was still inside with her boyfriend, Mike, and his friends. I could have stayed longer, Hannah had even offered to buy my next two drinks, but one of Mike's friends had been getting a bit handsy as the night unfolded. It wasn't something I had never experienced before, but I'd decided it was probably time to bail.

What I wanted more than anything was to get into my comfiest pyjamas, climb into bed, and continue bingeing my favourite show with my cat purring in my ear as he settled onto the pillow beside me.

The cold grew stronger as my thoughts drifted longingly to hot Yorkshire tea warming the back of my throat, and the cosiness of my fluffy duvet wrapped around me.

Looking down the long, straight road leading to my flat, I deliberated: it was only a fifteen-minute walk, and it would take the same amount of time to get an Uber. Still, my mother's voice surfaced in my mind, urging me to be smart and get a ride; a lot could happen to a girl in fifteen minutes when alone at night.

I looked down at my pretty blue dress that had made me feel so confident only hours ago. Now, it made me feel like an exposed target, even with my long coat concealing most of my body. I

suddenly felt an overwhelming impulse to be wearing an oversized jumper and baggy jeans.

I glanced around the desolate street – I had never seen it so empty. There were usually groups of people walking to and from clubs on Friday nights. In some ways I felt more at ease, it meant there were fewer people around to worry about, but it also meant there was no one to come to my aid.

Opening my phone, I tapped the frequently used Uber app and began searching for available rides.

Typically, there were none nearby, and the closest was nearly thirty minutes away.

I glanced in the direction of my flat once more.

Nothing that bad could happen in fifteen minutes, could it?

The tiny white Uber symbol drove about on my screen, all the way on the other side of town.

I closed Uber and opened up my location app; scrolling through my list of contacts, I sent my location to my mother, Hannah, and Kate, then I put it back in my bag and set off down the road towards home.

Immediately, I wished I had shoved some flat shoes in my bag before leaving home. The sharp rap of my heels on the pavement echoed while I walked, making me even more aware of how deserted the streets were. My mother's voice resurfaced, almost shouting now, to always take a pair of flat shoes out with me, because it's impossible to outrun a man whilst wearing heels.

I shook my head to clear the dark thoughts clouding my brain.

Nothing was going to happen in the fifteen minutes it took to walk down the main road to my flat.

All the streetlamps were lit, which made me feel slightly less apprehensive. When the lights broke you were left walking in

complete darkness for a few seconds before the next one lit up the path.

I'd always been told that as long as you keep to well-lit main roads and were careful about your surroundings, you would be fine. I'd listened to the people who had told me this over the years: my mother, my father, my teachers, my friends. I had been told how to protect myself almost every day since I turned thirteen, maybe even younger.

I reached up and pulled my hair out of its long ponytail remembering my old headmistress calling an assembly for all the girls and warning us not to wear our hair up on the way home, as a young girl had been sexually assaulted because she had been pulled into a secluded area by her ponytail.

I'd only been twelve at that assembly, and had refused to wear my hair up for months.

I remember at fifteen being told that most women will face sexual harassment at some point in their lives, so we needed to prepare ourselves. Only the other day I'd seen the stats, and it was scary to think that ninety-seven percent of young women had been sexually harassed, and sadly, it made sense. Every woman I knew had a story to tell, some had a lot more than two. Then there were the women who never had a chance to tell theirs.

A car turned the corner at the end of the road and sped along the tarmac towards where I was walking. I was drawn out of my thoughts, my chest tightening in apprehension.

The headlights lit me up for a second and I prayed that it wouldn't slow as I wrapped my coat tighter around myself so they couldn't see the treacherous dress and the way it hugged my body.

The car drove on and my tension released as all of my muscles relaxed.

Another car revved along a few seconds after the first and honked as it reached me, slowing down; the boys inside leered out of the window, despite barely being able to make out any of my features in the darkness. I gritted my teeth as I walked on, the car's tyres squealed as it left.

I wasn't even a third of the way along the road yet, and it already felt like I had been walking forever.

As I pushed on, the soles of my feet started to hurt. I began to think it may have been a better idea to return to the pub and wait for an Uber, but I was only ten minutes away, I didn't want to give up and turn back.

I reached the part of the road where it joined a narrow, wooded path. It was nice in the daytime; I enjoyed walking along listening to the birds singing in the trees, but now every shadow threatened to materialise into something terrifying. The birds were no longer singing, and the silence was deafening.

That was when I heard the footsteps breaking through the overbearing stillness.

I whipped around, but there was nothing there. Perhaps it was just leaves falling from one of the trees or simply a figment of my paranoid imagination.

I turned back around and started walking faster, all the time wanting to look over my shoulder to see if I was still alone.

At that moment, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, and their impossible journey through hell, surfaced unbidden from my memory.

Orpheus's wife had died, and when Orpheus went to the Underworld to get her, Hades had said that he could take her as long as he walked all the way out of the Underworld without looking back. If he turned to see Eurydice behind him, she would

have to remain in the Underworld forever. Of course, just before he reached the exit to the Underworld, he turned back to check that she was following, and she was taken back to Hades, never to see Orpheus or the light of day again.

Orpheus lost everything because he looked back when he should have only looked ahead, and Eurydice spent eternity in the Underworld because her husband couldn't keep his word.

I grasped at the moral of this story and ignored the ache in my feet, clutching my bag tightly and glancing around, but never behind.

I heard the sound again. I willed myself not to look, instead focusing on the corner I could see just up ahead. Once I was there, I could run.

Another footstep, another pace closer to the corner.

Something glinted brightly in the light from the streetlamp and a shadow darted out at me. I prepared myself to bolt, but it was just a fox streaking from underneath a nearby parked car back into the safety of the undergrowth, the light reflected in its eyes.

I exhaled deeply, my heart still racing as if I had already bolted, but I slowed my pace slightly, relief flooding over me. I realised it was just the silence of the night making me jumpy. I couldn't help glancing behind me, but saw nothing, not even the glimmer of the fox's eyes.

The pub was out of view now, too far down the road to even see the bright lights shining from inside. I wondered whether Hannah was still there or if she too had gone home, escorted safely by Mike.

I was nearly halfway home so I began to relax knowing that I would open my front door in about eight minutes, my cat waiting for me in the hallway, as always.

The sound of heavy footsteps echoed on the dark street, too heavy to be anything but a man.

They were louder now, as if whoever it was wasn't trying to be quiet, as if they knew how close I was to home.

I wondered if Orpheus had been able to hear Eurydice behind him, and whether that was what made him turn so close to the end, the fear that it wasn't his wife following him out of the Underworld, but something else.

The corner was only a couple of metres away, and once I turned it, I would emerge from the darkness of the trees and onto the well-lit road once more.

I walked as quickly as my aching feet would allow, and thought I heard the footsteps become heavier and more frequent as they also sped up.

I started to sweat as terror gripped me once more and I sprinted before I reached the corner, running as fast as I could along the road and turning into the first driveway I saw, my heels hitting the pavement like gunshots with every step.

I crouched behind the closest wall and listened.

Footsteps again, turning the corner, then nothing. Complete silence.

My heart was beating so loud that I couldn't be sure if the person had stopped or if the blood pounding in my ears was blocking the sound of them getting closer. I couldn't even hear the wind in the trees metres away.

I stayed still, not daring to move an inch for fear of my shoes giving me away.

Still nothing.

Not a single sound apart from several cars going by.

Eventually, my heartbeat slowed and the blood roaring in my ears subsided; I was able to hear the wind blowing in the trees once more. Whoever it was had either crossed to the other side of the

road and gone away, or they were waiting for me to come out of my hiding place.

I thought about my options. I couldn't stay in a stranger's driveway until the morning; it was freezing, and if there was someone looking for me, I wasn't exactly difficult to find.

I couldn't call the police, because I had nothing to tell them, and I knew too many women who had found the police to be no help.

I considered ringing my mum, but it was past midnight, she would be asleep. Instead, I rang Kate, but it went straight to voice-mail. I tried to ring Hannah as well, but she didn't pick up.

My only option was to get home as quickly as possible, and hope that whoever was behind me had gone.

I peered over the driveway wall and looked out onto the road. It was empty.

Slowly, I stood and began to creep forward.

My foot struck the pavement hard, the sound ricocheting off the road.

Glaring down at my traitorous heels, I pulled them off and held one in each hand.

My feet would definitely hurt from the loose gravel and small shards of glass on the pavement by the time I got home, but at least I could move quicker, quieter, and I had weapons if I needed them.

As soon as I started walking, I glanced around me to see if any of the shadows moved and followed my path along the road, but, to my relief, everything was silent and still. There was nothing to be afraid of, I reminded myself, it was simply all the things I had been taught to fear, manifesting into sounds that weren't what they seemed.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out to see a text from Hannah.

Are you okay?

I texted back quickly, glancing around me still, the apprehension never truly subsiding.

Not sure. Walking home. Bit freaked out.

I'd barely had time to put the phone back into my pocket when it buzzed again, this time with a phone call.

The second I answered, I could tell that Hannah was still in the pub and was substantially more drunk than she had been when I had left. I could hear the muffled sound of Mike and his friends laughing and talking loudly in the background.

'What's wrong?' Hannah asked, she was slurring her words slightly, but genuine concern laced her voice.

'I don't know,' I answered honestly, 'I'm walking home and I'm nearly there now, but I keep hearing someone following me. I'm probably being ridiculous.'

I heard her shushing the people around her, and she sounded much more sober when she spoke again, 'How close to home are you?'

'About five minutes,' I guessed. Never had this walk felt so long.

My feet throbbed with pain every time I took a step: they were sore from the rough pavement, and I was positive I had already stepped in glass, but I didn't dare put my heels back on.

'Do you want me and Mike to come and find you?'

I could hear the panic in her voice as if she was ready to run out of the door.

'It's okay,' I replied, trying to be logical, 'can you just stay on the phone with me until I get there?'

'Of course, although my phone is about to die so I might have to ring you back on Mike's, okay?' While she was talking, the sound of the pub seemed to fade away and wind began buffeting through

the microphone. I was pretty sure that once I got home, she would be knocking on my door within ten minutes.

‘Yeah, sure.’

‘I’m going to come and check on you anyway. We’re just looking for Tom – he went outside to smoke ages ago and he hasn’t—’

The phone cut out.

My stomach dropped, and for some reason dread chilled my bones.

I put my phone away, knowing Hannah would call back any minute and tried to focus on getting home. I was near my road, and it was a safe street, nothing had ever happened to anyone there before.

Up ahead, a man in a dark hoody turned out of my road and walked straight towards me, head down and hands in his pockets.

My legs tensed up, preparing me to bolt once more.

I tried to tell myself it was simply a man on his way home, just like me, but the fear wouldn’t leave me.

He looked up as he got closer and smiled. The smile seemed genuine. I forced myself to give a small smile back as I passed him, and finally turned into my road.

I could see my door up ahead. Only about thirty metres to go.

My phone buzzed with a call from an unknown number. Rationally, I knew it was probably Hannah ringing back on Mike’s phone, but the irrational part of my brain took over and I didn’t answer. I was so close now; I could return her call and let her know I was safe once I got through the front door.

The road was silent except for the sound of my bare feet lightly hitting the pavement.

Twenty metres.

My phone buzzed, a text from Kate: *I saw you sent me your location. Did you get home okay?*

I could hear footsteps behind me again. I didn't want to look; I kept my eyes focused on the door and slid my phone back into my pocket even as it buzzed, presumably with another text from Kate.

Fifteen metres.

The door was so close, I got my keys ready. I would soon be safe in the comfort of my own home. I could see my cat's head at the window, he was sat watching, waiting for me.

The thud of the footsteps seemed more distinct now. They were bolder, confident. Getting closer.

Ten metres.

I refused to turn my head and sped up, clutching my keys even tighter in my hand, the way I had been taught, my heels in the other. I tried to recall all the hours of self-defence my father had insisted on. Aim for the groin. Slam your palm upwards into their nose.

As I tensed up, preparing myself, I thought of the story of Eurydice and Orpheus once again. I was determined to make it out of the Underworld, but I could feel the pull to look behind me.

Would I be like Eurydice? Would it be a man who decided my fate, even if I did everything right, everything I had always been told to do?

Five metres.

My cat saw me and leapt off the windowsill to greet me at the door.

Maybe Eurydice knew she would never escape the Underworld.

I turned.

STEPHEN SALEH

Five Percent

The wipers screeched on the windshield and Conrad slammed them off.

'I'll stay out a bit longer, I want to get another fifty quid before I stop.'

'What about your dinner? I'm about to put something on,' his wife Janine's voice boomed out of the hands-free speaker. 'I don't want you wasting money.'

'I'll get a sandwich or something,' he lied.

'Make sure it's not McDonalds, alright?'

'No! Speak to you later,' he said and jabbed at the red button. He thought about the Big Mac and fries he would have just to spite her. Who the hell was she to tell him what to eat?

He turned the cab around and headed towards the drive-in on Edgware Road. It was quiet for a Saturday night. The busy hour was imminent, so it made sense to take a break now.

Conrad spotted her before she even gestured. Stood at the kerb, dressed in an elegant, black-lace dress, watching him approach. When he was close, she barely raised a hand. He would have missed it if he hadn't been watching her.

'Where to?' he asked as he pulled up.

'Hilton, Park Lane.' She stepped in, filling the cab with sensuous perfume. The Hilton was barely five hundred metres away, but at least it would pay for his burger.

The full moon shone through the black trees of Hyde Park, illuminating the vast open space, and Conrad observed his beautiful passenger in the rear-view mirror. She seemed captivated by the landscape.

They arrived within minutes and he pulled up to the entrance. 'Actually, it's not here, it's just over there.'

She pointed across the street to a large, corner townhouse with immaculate black brickwork and white windowsills. It towered two storeys higher than the rest of the terrace.

Conrad pulled up outside the house and a doorman opened the passenger door. She walked around to the driver's window and bent down so that they were just a few inches apart.

'That's... £5.50 please.'

'Listen,' she said huskily. He couldn't help but be captivated by her beauty. 'I have a spare ticket for an event here tonight. They're very expensive, but my guest didn't show up, so I can either pay you the fare, or give you the ticket. The food is superb.'

Conrad was taken aback. 'I...'

'Whichever you prefer.' Her smile was perfect.

'Sounds great, and I'm starving, but I'm not really dressed for it,' he said, looking down at his navy tracksuit.

'Nobody cares what you're wearing; it's not that kind of event,' she said, opening her purse and pulling out a black card. 'See you inside.'

She handed the ticket to him and walked towards the house, having made his mind up for him.

He examined the matte black piece of card, but it was just blank; no discernible features or writing on either side. But, as he turned it and the light caught it at a particular angle, he could just make out the number 13, barely legible. He sat there for a moment, unsure of what to do, twiddling the card.

'Sir?' the doorman said. 'I'll park your car for you if you'd like to make your way inside.'

'Oh, sure.' Conrad got out and the doorman took his seat.

‘Your name, sir?’

‘Conrad.’

‘Have a lovely evening Conrad,’ the doorman said, before driving off. A second doorman stood at the glossy black door and gestured inside. ‘Welcome, sir.’

Conrad stepped inside, where a young lady greeted him. ‘Good evening, sir, do you have your invitation?’

He handed her the black card and with the slightest glance at it she said, ‘Ah, yes, you’re Lilith’s guest. Do you have anything you’d like to leave in the cloakroom?’

Conrad tried to remember what T-shirt he had on beneath the tracksuit top and bum-bag, sagging with coins, hung at his hip.

‘I’m OK,’ he said.

‘Of course, sir. Please make your way into the dining room. The buffet has started, and the bar is to the left. If you need anything else, please come and find me. The entertainment will be starting in about an hour.’

‘Oh, I’ll have to leave after the buffet,’ Conrad mumbled. ‘That’s fine,’ she said, smiling sweetly.

Conrad stepped to one side, taking in the opulence of the interior. A sweeping staircase dominated the entrance lobby and the walls were filled with a variety of old portraits and landscapes, golden wallpaper showing between each one. At the base of the stairs was a white, marble statue. A nude, one arm held across her breasts, her head turned at an angle to see who was approaching.

The staircase curled around and he could see several doors leading off the first-floor landing. The lobby smelled of incense, but delicious food smells were wafting in from the dining room. Two couples entered the lobby from the dining room, both elegantly dressed.

‘Good evening,’ one of the ladies said, ‘you must be Lilith’s friend, Conrad.’

‘Uh, sort of,’ Conrad answered, unsure how to react and a little surprised that they had already been made aware of his name.

‘Would you like me to find her for you?’

‘Oh no, that’s fine, thank you. I’m just going to get something to eat.’ ‘You must try the tartare, it’s divine,’ the lady replied.

‘My favourite,’ Conrad said, as he watched the two couples ascend the stairs and enter one of the rooms, closing the door behind them. He felt slightly more at ease now, but wondered what the hell tartare was.

In the dining room he felt very self-conscious. The men were dressed in tuxedos and all the ladies had fine dresses, but everyone who passed greeted him with a ‘good evening,’ treating him the same as everyone else.

The room was large and Conrad estimated that maybe sixty or so people were stood around talking and eating.

A lady approached him and offered her hand. ‘Good evening, Conrad, I’m Alice.’

‘Hello, Alice, I’m Conrad.’ As soon as he said it, he felt himself slowly dying inside. ‘Sorry, I’m a little nervous.’

‘Nervous? Why? It’s just a little fun. Have you eaten yet?’

‘No, I was just about to.’

‘Let me show you what there is.’

She took his hand and led him through the crowd. He walked slightly behind, giving him the opportunity to admire her. He had no idea how he had ended up in this situation, but he was struggling with the decision of whether to tell Janine or not. He knew it would just lead to complications so decided it would probably be best not to say anything.

‘So do you like fish, meat, or . . . maybe you just like vegetables?’ She handed him a plate, smiling. ‘Please enjoy, it’s all excellent.’

She turned and left before he could reply.

There were a few others at the buffet table, perusing the dishes. Conrad had never seen anything like it. Delicacies beautifully arranged on silver and crystal platters; shellfish and crab on a mound of crushed ice, and what looked like a whole pig on a spit, with a chef standing behind, waiting to carve.

Conrad walked alongside the table, overwhelmed by it all.

‘I recommend the tartare.’ The chef pointed to what looked, to Conrad, like a plate of raw mincemeat topped with a raw egg.

‘Mmm, no thank you, I think I’ll have the . . .’ Conrad pointed to the pig.

‘The suckling pig? Good choice, sir.’

He carved off a few slices and placed them on Conrad’s plate. Conrad added all kinds of delicious-looking food until he could fit no more on without it becoming embarrassing. At the All You Can Eat Chinese Buffet he and Janine often frequented, he had mastered the art of loading a single plate with a three-course meal, but he thought it best just to come back for seconds in the current environment.

He found a quiet corner to eat, but first he had to take the obligatory photo of his plate. He patted his pockets and realised he had left his phone in the cab in the confusion. Probably for the best, he thought; the less evidence the better.

The food was incredible. The juicy pork melted in his mouth; the prawns, subtly spiced, had a delicate crunch. Even the salad that he’d taken out of politeness was exquisite.

As he was nearly finished and deciding whether it would be appropriate to return for more, a man walked into the middle of the room and rang a hand bell.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, the entertainment will start very shortly in the drawing room.’

A ripple of excitement ran through the crowd and they started moving towards the door.

Within a few moments, just a few groups of two or three remained, talking and finishing their drinks, so Conrad took the opportunity to refill his plate. He wondered if he might be able to load a serviette up to have as a snack later, but decided against it.

A waitress passed nearby collecting glasses and Conrad caught her eye. ‘Excuse me, what is this tonight?’

‘It’s Third Saturday. Is it your first time?’

‘Yes. But who are they?’

‘Oh, it’s all the members. They all come together once a month. It’s going to be great fun.’

She wandered off leaving him none the wiser.

Conrad finished his plate and looked up. He was now the only person left in the room.

Nodding to the chef who was still at the buffet table straightening the remaining food, Conrad made his way back to the entrance lobby.

‘Are you leaving us already? The night is young,’ the receptionist asked him.

‘Unfortunately, I have to get back to work.’

‘Oh, what a shame. It’s going to be such fun,’ she said.

‘Yes, so I hear. Thanks so much.’

The young lady opened the door for Conrad and Lilith stood outside, on the step, smoking.

‘Hello, Conrad. So sorry we didn’t get the chance to speak earlier, I was so busy catching up with everyone.’

‘That’s fine. I had a lovely meal.’

‘Yes, Jacques is a miracle worker. Are you leaving?’

‘Yes, I have to work.’

‘That’s so sad. I can’t convince you to stay? The fun is just about to start.’

Conrad looked into her eyes and was smitten. He couldn’t believe that she was taking the time to even talk with him.

‘I really can’t,’ he said.

‘I understand. Goodnight.’ She held out her hand and he took it in his. He stood there mesmerised as she tossed her cigarette into the street and walked inside.

‘Shall I fetch your car, sir?’ the doorman asked.

‘Yes, please. It’s under the name Conrad.’

‘I know, sir. Won’t be a moment,’ he replied, and walked around the corner.

Conrad stood alone on the steps. It had probably been the most bizarre thing that had happened to him as a taxi driver, and he relished the thought of sharing the story with his fellow cabbies in the tea hut. They always had great ‘you’ll never guess who I had in the back of my cab’ stories to tell, and now finally he had one to match, even trump, their best.

Across the road, another grand Mayfair townhouse was lit throughout and Conrad could see straight inside. On the first floor, a large chandelier hung from the ceiling, and on the wall was something very familiar to Conrad. The same Blue Lady painting that had always been, and still was, a permanent fixture on the wall of his mother’s council flat. As a child, he had been fascinated by the bizarre portrait of the oriental lady, and even now the sight of it recalled the taste of custard creams that he always had when he visited his mother.

Feeling voyeuristic, he watched as a group of people entered the room with glasses in hand, talking and laughing, and just for a brief

moment Conrad felt a connection to this world, a world in which he was normally a ghost. For once, he had a sense of belonging.

The familiar rattle of his black cab roused him from his thoughts and signalled the end of his eventful night.

The driver pulled up by Conrad and held the door open for him.

'Uh, you know what,' Conrad said, 'I think I'll just pop back inside for five minutes. Is that okay?'

'Certainly, sir. I'll leave the car here. It'll be fine at this time of night.'

Conrad had surprised himself with his sudden change of mind. He didn't want his brief sojourn into this strange world to end quite so soon.

He walked sheepishly back inside, but the receptionist didn't seem at all surprised when he passed through.

'The drawing room is just to the right,' she said.

The same people stood around the lavishly decorated drawing room, drinks in hand, but Conrad sensed the chatter was much more excited, even though the entertainment evidently hadn't started yet.

A man approached him and offered his hand. 'Hello, Conrad, I'm Jacob.'

'Pleased to meet you, Jacob.'

'What do you do?' Jacob asked.

'I'm a cab driver.'

'Oh, I didn't mean as a job, but that sounds like fun. Do you know what you'll do next?'

'Next?' Conrad asked.

'When you're bored of driving a car.'

'No, I've never really considered it.'

'No, I don't suppose many people do,' Jacob said.

'What do you do?' Conrad asked.

‘Work wise? I go to an office, read some emails, write some emails, occasionally talk to people. I’m boring myself just talking about it.’

A waiter passed with a tray of filled wine glasses and Jacob tapped him on the shoulder. ‘Could you bring me a scotch please, dash of water, make it a large one. So, Conrad, have you ever considered changing everything?’

‘Everything?’

‘Yes. Everything.’

‘Do you mean my job?’

‘Job. Home. Wife, or husband. Name even.’

Conrad laughed, confused by the question. ‘No, can’t say I have.’

‘Why not? If you could start your life all over again, would you do it all the same?’

‘No, I guess not,’ Conrad replied.

‘Then why settle for it now? Money?’

‘Partially, I guess.’

The waiter returned with Jacob’s scotch and Conrad noticed Jacob slipping a tip into his jacket pocket. He was sure he saw the purple of a twenty-pound note.

‘What is this place? Who are these people?’ Conrad asked.

‘Just friends. Are you a gambling man Conrad?’

‘I like an occasional dabble on the gee-gees.’

‘Lovely. Would you like to try?’ Jacob asked, pointing behind Conrad.

Conrad turned, and on a table was a wheel of fortune. A woman stood next to it looking directly at him. The wheel was mounted on a spindle and was divided into twenty numbered segments. One to nineteen in red, and twenty, black.

‘One in twenty,’ Jacob said.

'How does it work?' Conrad asked, intrigued.

'Very simple. You spin the wheel. If it lands on red, you win, black you lose. You have a 95% chance of success.'

'What do I win?'

'Well, we'll have to see.'

Conrad noticed for the first time that the entire room had fallen silent, all eyes were on him.

'Who'll start the bidding?' Jacob called out. 'Shall we start at two?'

'2 million!' somebody in the crowd shouted.

'2.5!'

'2.7!'

'3 million!'

'3.5!'

'4!'

The shouts coming from the crowd stopped. Complete silence.

'Any more?' Jacob asked, scanning the crowd.

'5 million!'

There was a single unified gasp from the crowd.

Jacob held three fingers in the air, lowered one after a few seconds, then a second, and finally took down his hand.

'There you are then. Land on red, you get five million pounds.'

Conrad laughed; he really couldn't tell if they were being serious. 'And if it lands on black?'

Jacob pointed to the winning bidder. 'Roger?'

Roger walked to the front of the crowd. Immaculately dressed in his tuxedo, bow tie, and mirror shine shoes.

'Well, I know it's a cliché, a bit cringy, but I can't help myself. You know me, Jacob.' Roger turned to Conrad, 'It's going to have to be your soul.'

‘What does that mean?’ Conrad asked, a sense of nervousness encroaching.

‘Roger collects souls. He has a thing for them,’ Jacob explained.

‘Yes, but what does that mean?’ Conrad persisted.

‘He will take your soul, and use it as he sees fit.’

‘And what will happen to me?’ Conrad was now feeling a sense of panic.

‘Well, you are your soul. Your body won’t exist anymore if that’s what you mean.’

‘You’ll kill me?’ Conrad exclaimed.

‘Well, that’s rather crudely put.’

‘Are you insane?’ Conrad took a step back from Jacob.

‘It’s just a bit of fun, no compulsion.’

‘Fun? You’re talking about killing me.’

‘You have a 5% chance of passing on a few years earlier than you normally would.’

‘Few years?’

‘Well, it’s all relative,’ Jacob explained. ‘How old are you now? Late 40s? You can walk out of here now and continue driving your cab until you eventually die of illness or old age or whatever. Or play, take that 95% chance of becoming rich, a fresh start, really enjoying your life. We will teach you things you could barely imagine.’

Conrad was stunned, thoughts raced through his head. The crowd had moved closer so that he was penned in; he wouldn’t make the door if he had to fight for it. Plus, he recalled that the two doormen were heavily built.

‘You have to weigh everything up, Conrad. What are the chances of you dying on your way home tonight, or by next week?’

Conrad surveyed the crowd; all eyes were on him.

Lilith stood at the front and smiled at him as their eyes met.

‘Look around you, Conrad.’ she said, ‘Everyone here is a winner. Why not join us?’

‘I’d just need you to read and sign this form.’ Jacob had produced what looked like a contract and Roger was already leaning over the table signing away, a black American Express card in his hand at the ready.

‘And I just need to make you aware we’ve had twelve straight winners. I assume that’s why Roger bid a record high.’

‘You’re all fucking mad,’ Conrad whispered.

‘It’s just a bit of fun,’ Jacob replied. ‘Four years ago, I was working in a chicken factory in Essex when I was given my chance.’

Conrad took one step towards the crowd and they parted like the Red Sea, opening a path to the door. He slowly backed his way through them until he reached the lobby. He turned and clenched his fist in readiness, in case the doorman tried to stop him, but instead he greeted him with a cheerful ‘Goodnight, sir,’ and handed him his car keys.

Conrad got in the cab as quickly as he could and sped off.

He picked up his phone. Seven missed calls, all Janine. As he looked at the screen, a message popped up. ‘Where the fuck are you?’

He had driven maybe fifty metres and pulled over to the kerb. In his rear-view mirror, he could still make out the doorman. He sat for a moment in silence, before performing the infamous cabbie U-turn and headed back to the townhouse.

MUHUMMAD KHURRAM SALIM

The Wonderful Day Of Eid

Eid is a celebration that is central to all Bangladeshis. It comes after a month of fasting, during Ramadan, and is a most joyous occasion. It is meant to be an entire day of fun and festivities, which people are more than ready for, after a month of rigour. During the whole Ramadan month, leading up to Eid, Muslims are required to fast from before sunrise to sunset.

A whole day of abstaining from food and drink can tax the mind and body, to a great extent. People enjoy iftar, the breaking of fast, and become used to the strictness of Ramadan. They thank Allah for arranging Eid, at the end of every fasting season. People look forward to every Eid; it is the Muslim version of Christmas, when there is a holiday and a general mood of celebration. It is worth waiting for because it is a culmination of religious and social activities. Eid starts with going to the mosques, of large congregations, when a special prayer is said. The devout thank Allah with tears and sighs, words and best sentiments, and there is a mood of calm among all worshippers. Everyone wears the best new apparel which they spend a sizeable amount on, well before Eid day. Men prefer traditional panjabis/payjamas and the women love to wear sophisticated saris/selwar-kameezes.

The imam delivers a heart-warming sermon before the prayers. There might be stories told from the Quran, and words of wisdom. The worshippers listen in rapt attention, and later, after prayers, they embrace in a gesture of peace. Back at their homes, Muslims have breakfast, after a month's abstinence from it. Appreciation for quality food goes up and everyone is thankful to Allah. The food, all day long, is rich and delicious. Meats and pilao/porotha

are always preferred, and, for dessert, sweetmeats and other popular sweets.

It is customary to visit relatives and friends on Eid day. Everyone feels good catching up with loved acquaintances who are ready to be the best hosts. Having snacks and meals with family/friends is a reward unto itself. The prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a very social person and loved people and communication. We have an obligation to follow the example of the prophet (peace be upon him) and to link up with relatives and friends on the unique occasion of Eid.

The youngsters give salam (greetings) to their elders and the latter give salami (some cash in reward.) All Muslims embrace and give salam to another, on Eid day. The day thus brings the whole community together, in a most notable way. Worshippers are meant to give charitably on Eid day and many poor people receive care and attention during Eid. Poverty in Bangladesh can be alleviated the more people resort to charity and Eid is a time when they make new constructive resolutions.

There are two Eid celebrations, in the course of a year. One is at the end of Ramadan, and the other a couple of months later which celebrates the prophet Ibrahim's (peace be upon him) devotion to Allah and near-sacrifice of his own son. The latter Eid, known as Eid ul Adha, is marked by the eating of sacrificial animals. The media relay many entertaining programmes on Eid day and in the evening. These include traditional Eid songs and music. News-shows report on the day's festivities and on how prayers were said in prominent mosques.

Children and adults have fun in Eid fairs where there may be music, songs, and items for sale, including a variety of food. During Eid ul Adha, people sacrifice animals in gatherings, and distribute



the meat later. The poor ones benefit from the distributions. We Bangladeshi Muslims, who live abroad, do our best to capture the Bangladeshi way of celebrating our main Islamic day of festivities. In many ways, the celebrations are not the same, but we make the most of it. Relatives and friends get together for fun and feasting. At the start of the day, we visit local mosques for prayer and there is much camaraderie.

Eid is pivotal in our social/communal life and makes Bangladeshis feel a joy that is unsurpassed. We can't wait for the next one, all year through!

JUSTIN SOLLY

Blood For Blood

The hunter stalked her prey. The shadows seemed to stick to her, as if recognising her for a kindred spirit. She crept forward stealthily, wearing the shadows like a sinister cloak, ghosting through the blackness. The heartbeat throbbed, leaving behind an echo, and a trail to follow – he was close. An invisible fae fiend; infamous for his treachery and trickery, and subsequently, her mark. Cunning prey, required an ingenious hunter.

Edra stared into the shadows, attempting to see through them with her keen eyes. Combing the murk for a clue of her quarry. In her peripheral, she detected an unusual movement – a wraithlike blur – for a brief second the formless shade solidified, before assuming its shapeless identity. Edra pounced in pursuit, detaching herself from the shadowy veil of the doorframe.

She glided by the distorted shapes of abandoned hovels, melting through the gloom, sweeping low and clinging to the overshadows cast from the walls. The light poles were dormant – fitting for a place that had never known the sanctuary of sun – a ghost town, the only inhabitants being the shades of memory. After weeks of investigating and tracking, this is where the chase would end.

A voice reached out from the darkness, festered with malice and mockery.

‘Your hunt is futile, blood leech. How can you hunt what you cannot see?’

Crouching, her head cocked to one side, she circled on the spot as her prey taunted her. His voice reverberated around the dank air, a trick upon the tentative breeze.

‘How will you kill me, leech? You that rely on senses, yet lack the sense to pass on this thankless task. . . I know your master, that low bred criminal! I pity you.’

Edra listened intently – but not to his words – words were useless sounds, easily manipulated. Instead, she listened for the soft scuffling of footsteps, for the heartbeat, which was drumming harder now, closer. Her multitude of sharpened senses, coupled with a hunter’s intuitiveness, warned her of his approach. Her nose wrinkled at the undeniable putrid reek of silver, its revolting taste lingering on her tongue. Feigning ignorance to his presence, her hand dropped to grasp for the satchel at her side, deftly unscrewing the lid.

Her prey, sure in his certainty that he was the hunter – not her – prowled closer. Silver hummed, vibrating in the air. The keening, warbling blade and foul smell edged closer, along with the spectre. In her ear, the ripples of his heartbeat splashed louder in the deep reservoir of gloom, making a mockery of the stillness where hers used to be. The huntress waited with the patience of an immortal killer.

The churning of the metal thrummed underneath the steady beat of his life force, the overlapping sounds forming an irksome orchestra. Now was the opportune moment, muscles poised in readiness uncoiled explosively. Edra span, launching the contents of the satchel behind her. White mist scattered across the vacant air, congealing and taking shape, lending form to her phantom prey. His outline appeared before her, the white framework of an image etched itself into the darkness – complete with a head and a pair of legs and arms. The figure floundered for a moment, clawing at its eyes. The fiend soon recovered, slashing forward with his white sword.

Quicker than thought, her bared fangs flew to his throat – the origin of the intrusive noise – his throbbing jugular. Teeth, like



twin daggers, punctured deep into tender flesh – that offered no resistance as she drained his pulse from his veins. His scream died soundlessly on his lips; blue blood prevented from turning red in the air. As she fed herself his heartbeat faltered, fading, as nourishment flooded into her lifeless lungs. Her victim's body spasmed violently in the guillotine embrace of her teeth, as her venom took hold. Her jaw unlocked, springing open, and releasing the mangled throat. The hollow husk crumpled to the floor. The back of her coat sleeve moved across her mouth, smearing blood across with its passage, the ghastly picture of murder painted there.

Edra spat with disgust. Vile, toxic blood – poisonous. A meal is a meal. Blood was everything. Blood was her payment, the key to her survival. Turning aside from the bloodless bag of bone, she made her way towards the labyrinth of tunnels. Abruptly, a violent coughing fit racked her ribs. Her mouth stung from the smoky, peppery taste of the creature's blood, her body was already rejecting it. The stench of silver disorientated her sharpened senses. On to the city. Human blood, that is what I need, not this poison.

Stopping, she retrieved a small metal object from her long coat's deep pockets. Within the confines of the cage, the diminutive figure of a fairy slept. Edra rattled the cage violently. The fairy roused sleepily, standing up and shooting her a reproachful look. Edra shook it again, harder. The tiny creature extended an infinitesimal finger in an obscene gesture. With a snarl, Edra took the prison in both hands and shook it ferociously – ignoring the shrill protests – until finally, light sputtered into existence from her unwilling servant.

Edra tugged the rim of her hat down over her brow, making her more inconspicuous in the shrouding darkness, pulling the collar of her coat snug around her. She exited the mouth of the tunnel, leading



into a quagmire of similar tunnels, then another – there she joined a pilgrimage of like-minded people, heading towards the station. Edra withdrew a cigarette, placing it between her bloody lips, its end smouldered into life as she sucked it into her breathless lungs.

Ahead of the platform, gouged into the earth, was a gaping maw stretching both ways into swallowing darkness. The passengers waited, illuminated faintly by the waning, shuddering light from a lone light pole. Beside her, an elf glanced at her, his hat resting atop his pointed ears. His pale, translucent skin – starved of sunlight – blotted with freckles, like ink splattered on fresh paper. His smooth, age-less face would have furrowed with displeasure, if it could have – the intention though – was not lost on the vampire. Edra shouldered her way to the precipice of the platform, earning herself a reproachful sideways look from a dwarf half her size, with an unkempt beard and a dome shaped hairless head, shining in the waxing light of the dying fairy. The tunnel wailed with wheezing breath.

Two spherical orbs of light glowed in the distance, increasing in intensity as the worm-train approached. Darkness shrunk before the searching light as tendrils of mist constricted around her feet. Eerily, the odd keening noise of the worm mingled with the cries of the wind, meshing into a chorus of misery. The discs of light neared, appearing to be artificial until the bulging eyes of a massive creature came into focus, emitting a bright ethereal light piercing through the incorporeal body of mist. The bulbous bulk of the worm wriggled through the tunnel, its grotesque body snaking across the earth, its filmy grey skin slithering with ease through the well-worn passageway, crafted by its kin. Impassively, she watched as the worm hurtled towards them along the tunnel's breadth. In its



wake, the creature pulled a string of wooden carriages attached to a harness, which connected to the beast's bridle. Atop the carriage, a gnome drove the monster forwards, his small hands grasping oversized reins; torrents of electricity curled and snapped down the metal chains, the gnome's small stature dwarfed by the flabby flanks of the worm. The Earthdigger and its cargo came tottering to a halt by the platform. Barging ahead, the dwarf with the shiny head ripped open the metal mesh of the doors. People exited and boarded simultaneously, creating a confuddling congestion as they jostled and shoved each other with their conflicting agendas. Manners were rarer than humans in the low-world.



On entering, Edra shunned the welcoming invitation of the open seat, next to the grotesque, scaly figure of its neighbour. Beady eyes bored into her. A forked tongue darted out to wet its lips, a tail twitching beneath the seat. Edra grasped the looped handles above her head as the worm-train lurched into transit, ignoring the intrusive stares. A sudden spasmodic fit of coughing choked her, startling her with its intensity. With a grimace, she withdrew a piece of cloth from an inner pocket, holding it to her mouth and stifling her cough. When the fit subsided, she withdrew the cloth – stained with blood – not hers; for she had none to bleed.



The worm-train picked up momentum, heading for the metropolis of the city. Her destination: the thriving, bustling, filth ridden city of Érenstien. There she would meet with her employer, Finnick. The goblin was many things: a gangster, blood-dealer, trafficker and general scrounge of society – still he was the closest thing she had to an acquaintance. Edra had no friends; friends were for the living. As they travelled, her mind wandered, briefly contemplating her kill without remorse. Blood for blood. Her employer would

pay her with human blood, a rare commodity and the only thing keeping her alive (or at least from staying dead).

It was a moment before she realised it was not the shuddering, lurching movement of the train that was causing her hand to tremor. Edra reached for her inner pocket, plucking a vial half filled with blood from its midst. With trembling fingers, she unfastened the lid, yanking it free. Edra stuck out her tongue – which quivered with anticipation – shakily, she applied two careful drops. The sweet taste of human blood thrilled her instantly, diluted or not, it was what her body craved. The blood dulled the edge of her hunger momentarily – the equivalent of a crumb of bread for a grumbling, mortal stomach. When am I ever satisfied?

Edra relished in the fleeting enjoyment of her meal and the welcome sensations that followed; warmth and an echo of a heart-beat – phantom or not – an illusion of a lost life. The ironic words of the turner, the one who had raped her life of meaning, came back to haunt her; ‘The dead must feed on the living, in order to live’. Not anymore, you can’t, you bitch.

Rocking with the motion of the worm-train, she ignored her cravings, and the imagined rumblings of a stomach long since retired from its purpose. The humans were all but extinct. With their magic, they had dropped fire on each other, incinerating their cities and making the Up-world all but inhospitable. The ones that survived hid in the dark like cockroaches, cowering in bunkers – like tins of tuna, waiting to be ripped open – if you could find them. There was a time where she would go up-world to hunt, selectively trimming the fat off humanity, butchering from the shadows. Granted, unwillingly – like a mouse transformed into a vulture – forced to eat mice as part of its new diet, a new sickening reality. The irony. Those times had passed. Now, just

scrounging enough blood to keep her body working was a challenge, a thankless one. Whatever humanity remained within her was an echo of the past. My humanity was taken from me, stolen! I was a mother. . . I had a life.

With a final lurch, the train teetered to a halt, arriving at the station of Érenstien. Edra exited with the others, jumping the yawning gap from carriage to platform neatly. Adjusting her hat, she raised her eyes to the sprawling city. The mass assembly of buildings stretched out at various heights; the large cavernous ceiling loomed above. Thin spirals jutted out at intervals, like mangled, broken fingers thrust from a grave. Black smoke billowed from chimneys, pooling into semblances of clouds above the city, trapped with no means of escape, a metaphor for their existence. Myriads of lights blinked, like the sad twinkling of a thousand dying stars, rendering the city with substance and shape. A tall humanoid pushed past her, cursing her as if it was her fault. After a moment, a lit cigarette appeared in her hand as she strode towards the pigsty of a city, to find one particular, rutting swine – in search of blood.

Sure enough; Finnick was as happy as a pig in shit. Smaller than a dwarf, yet bigger than a gnome: an ugly green imitation of a human, with warts for a nose and drooping ears sprouting with tufts of bristly black hair. Thankfully, the rest of his unpleasant features cowered underneath an over-sized hood. He cooed and snorted with pleasure as she recounted her success.

‘You said you had something special, Finnick. What is it? I need to resupply. I’m down to my last vial. It needs to be better than the shit you gave me last time.’

Curdled milky eyes regarded her shrewdly, as he hobbled around the hovel he called a home – a home she called a pigsty.

‘Yes, yes... I always keep my promises, first rule of business! I think you’ll be impressed! A special treat for my most adept killer, my most murderous artist. A warm meal, for an icy heart... come with me to the tavern. It’s best I show you.’

Warm meal? A human... Alive? A hot meal... something besides the watered down, cold blood weened from the ill, or sickly. There was a time where she had shied away from feasting on her former species, appalled by the idea... Edra pushed the fleeting thought from her mind. The prospect of the treat excited her, imagining the warm gush of sweet, human blood... Finnick, you old bastard! Perhaps you’re not so bad. He most definitely was, yet shortcomings were easy to overlook with a favourable predisposition. She ghosted his heels, as a hungry dog follows its master, with the assuredness that feeding time was close at hand.

Edra followed the goblin through the soot-blackened streets. The buildings were mismatched, in various states of disrepair and rot, covered in blankets of black ash and grimy filth. Some crafted of stone, others rotten wood, and others still made with stolen or scavenged foreign human resources. The poor, abysmal state of their situation etched into the run-down architecture, the sad story told in its materials.

Above, black clouds shed ashen tears as they passed inhabitants of the city, they hurried past, occupied with their own interests. They ranged from Imps to stooping giants, hunched from a life-time spent squeezing through low doors and tunnels, that slowly dwarfed their species and mocked their name. There was no sign of her kind, or of the kind she feasted on. The doom of their species went hand in hand, like a fading star – they sputtered out together in the twilight of the world.

Her guide reached a dishevelled hovel, pounding on the side

door with a pale green fist decorated with rings and warts. The door creaked open, the unwelcoming sound at odds with the welcoming gesture from the Ogre, which was at odds with his unwelcoming disposition. They followed the hulking creature as he ducked under the doorway leading to a private area of the tavern. On entering, the doorman slumped back onto his stool, which groaned a cry of protest as he scratched at an itchy tusk.

Inside the dim tavern, darkness ruled. The only light seeped from candles atop the tables – fairies were rare, their species extinguishing along with their coveted light source. They approached a table huddled in a corner; wax oozed down the side of candles, drooling towards the stained wood beneath. An elf deposited two flagons of flat beer onto the table.

‘On the house boss,’ he said.

Finnick waved him away. Impatiently jabbing at her with a fat green caterpillar, that resembled a finger. ‘Do you want to consume the meal hot? I’ve kept her fresh for you! Or I can leech the body, farm it as usual and dilute it for longevity. I said I had something special, and I do! A fresh human. I won it at a game of cards. If not for you, I would have folded! I can take you down and you can see for yourself.’

Edra sipped the beer for the sake of appearances; sour tasting stuff (not that it mattered to the echoes of habit). A human... in the flesh! Her hunger washed over her; undeniable and implacable – begging and pleading like a stray dog. How I wish to rend the flesh myself... yet it’s been many an age. I prefer to not think about where my food comes from, my former species... their accusing eyes staring as I steal the life from them; they all hurled the same silent accusation: monster!

‘Well?’

‘A hot meal would be a welcome change.’

‘Stupid creatures. No species has ever earned their own extinction so readily than the cursed humans. Enjoy the blood-bag. I always keep my promises!’

Edra ceased with the futile act of drinking her beer, standing up to go. Finnick took the hint, finishing his own swill. ‘Let me show you to your meal! A fine treat well earned! Tell me, did he suffer? I would have loved to of seen the blood drain from his veins myself. That fiend! That spineless scavenger... there is always somebody, some faction... challenging my authority! When will an insect learn its place, and show respect for the boot?’

Edra followed the goblin out of the rank tavern as he babbled about his perceived injustices, polluting the air further with rhetorical questions. They passed through a different door to which they came in, descending into the dank basement of the cellar.

Edra followed the goblin down the stairs. The goblin clutched a fairy lantern, which exuded a weak light – whimpering its pathetic pleas in protest upon dead ears. Excitement flooded her, the scintillating smell of fresh blood and the thrill of the prize to come. The heartbeat quaked in the air, strong and steady – her victim was asleep – her heartbeat seemed to live within her own lifeless veins. Edra revelled in the fantasy of blood travelling around her wasted body. If only.

They finished their descent. The waning glow of the lantern splayed their shadows onto the far wall, painting their silhouettes on the canvas there. A lone drip of water from the ceiling interrupted the silence. The room was bare but for the singular cage, crammed into the far corner. At the site of the pile of rags asleep on the floor, her fangs bared with pleasure. A bag of sinew and flesh. Saliva

pooled in her mouth, filling her mouth with murderous intent. Her hands trembled with anticipation. The smell! Edra breathed in the alluring scent deeply, her chest heaving with imaginary oxygen.

The goblin turned to her, a greedy look displayed on his yellow-green features, made sicklier still by the pusillanimous light of the lantern. The pitiful whimperings of the fairy intensified.

‘Shut that thing up, will you?’

Finnick stowed the lantern without objection, plunging them into darkness. ‘Do you mind if I watch?’ he asked, murderous glee creeping into his tone.

‘Yes. I mind. Leave me alone with her. . . I want to relish in her fear before I feast. Make sure I’m not disturbed.’

A flicker of annoyance, tinged with disappointment, passed over the goblin’s face, despite the darkness’s attempts at hiding it. ‘As you wish. Report to me when you’re done. I will be upstairs. We can talk business.’

With that, the goblin left her. Edra walked to the cage. Unable to make out its features, its figure swamped in rags, its chest rising and falling gently. Alive! Her hunger was building, almost uncontrollable now – demanding to be satisfied. She kicked the cage, delighting as the creature sprung awake, pushing off the ground with its feet and sliding to the back of the cage where it lay sobbing, its face covered by matted hair.

Edra smiled. The delicious scent of fear tantalised her, the unmistakable heady scent. The woman’s heartbeat intensified through fear. Edra fancied it beating in her own chest. If she had a heart, she knew it would hammer now, much like her victims. In a blur of movement, the cage was in front of her. Eagerly, she ripped the padlock asunder and flung the door open, biting her lip in anticipation.

‘Come woman, come enjoy your freedom.’

The woman's whimper became more pitiful still, her wild heartbeat exploded with frantic terror. So much fear! Like salt and pepper for a steak – the seasoning of a good meal.

Edra's trepidations from earlier had vanished. Now she was a hungry huntress; her prey cornered. Another flurry of movement and she darted into the cage, withdrawing her victim by a head full of hair and flinging her across the room. The whimpers turned into a long, drawn-out scream – until she landed in a heap, sending a flutter of excitement coursing through Edra. She relished in the forgotten sensation. If I'm a monster, so be it. . . Guilt was absent now. I am what you made me.

The woman scuttled through the darkness, like the rodent she was, her terror building to a delicious crescendo. Edra stalked her slowly, a cat with a mouse within her paws. Her cursed nature took hold, succumbing to the evilness of her existence. The woman cowered in the corner, trembling hands covering her face, crying pathetically. She was small, malnourished, but young and healthy. Enough, I want her flesh!

Moving with supernatural speed, the vampire appeared in front of the trembling human like an apparition. Her hand snapped out, yanking the woman's head back, and revealing her throbbing vein; juicy and thick. . . fangs bared, snarling. She stopped – stunned – poised to strike. Edra blinked, staring into the human's face, startled by a shock of recognition. Edra stepped back, horrified. Her face. . .

No woman at all, a child. A child! All at once, her hunger ebbed down to a dull throb. So like her, slight of build, saucer green eyes – now dilated with terror – A child. My child. . . the spitting likeness of her.

Edra collapsed to the floor. All her hunters' instincts fled her, leaving her wallowing in self-hatred. I am a monster, to kill a

child. Shaking, she withdrew the vial from her coat, applying the last drops of blood to her tongue. Her groggy thoughts cleared with the application of the blood. Focus returned. Her hunger curbed for a moment, transformed from a rabid animal to some semblance of what she used to be – an imprint of a human. The girl cowered, sobbing openly, confused and terrified by the sudden change of events.

‘What is your name, child?’ she asked.

The girl was overcome with terror, unable to speak, her eyes brimmed with tears.

‘Cover your neck with your hair.’

The girl obliged, shaking like a sapling in a storm.

‘Your name? I won’t hurt you, child. Monster I am, but I am no child killer.’

The girl wept and hugged her bony knees, tears flowing ceaselessly. Perhaps ten years old. The age of my daughter. . . Phantom tears itched at her eyeballs from the sting of memory. Edra recoiled from it. I had no control, I just turned! She did this to you! Now. . . I have a choice.

‘Child, do not be alarmed. I will read your thoughts. I won’t hurt you.’

The girl cried out in fear as she edged closer. ‘No! Please! No! I can’t lead you to them!’ she said, sobbing.

Ah. ‘Your family? I will help you, child. I will take you back to them, unharmed.’

The sniffing girl composed herself slightly, regarding her with suspicion. ‘Y-you. . . Y-you won’t hurt them?’

Edra smiled, ensuring her fangs remained hidden, offering a hand. The child regarded it suspiciously, seemingly realising that she was her best choice at survival. Edra helped her up. Her small

warm hand felt odd, and very much alive within the cold prism of her dead one. She gritted her teeth against the scent of blood, suppressing her hunger. Starving is nothing new.

'Follow me, child, and don't get in the way. I will get you Up-world. Now, tell me your name? If we are to be friends, we must know each other's names, mustn't we?' she said, bending down to her level.

The little girl nodded. 'Tammy,' she said, shyly wiping tears from her eyes.

'Okay Tammy, my name is Edra. When we get upstairs, bad people will try to hurt us. I want you to find a corner, close your eyes, cover your ears, and hide. Okay?'

The girl nodded. Hand in hand, Edra led them up the stairs. Diseased as I am, you cannot dampen the maternity of a mother with any curse.

Edra and the child appeared out of the shadows from the doorway. Finnick turned to regard her, his initial words of greeting dying on his lips, on seeing the girl.

'Have you lost your mind? What are you doing with her?' The goblin backed away, skirting a table and pushing a chair out of the way in his panic, fumbling for the dagger at his hip.

'I'm taking her. Don't get in the way, Finnick. Lead me to your rooms, to the tube up-world.'

The goblin made to call for help. He was too slow. In a blur, she was already behind him, cradling his neck in her hands, yanking his hair back by the roots. The girl let out a small scream, running to hide under a table.

'I don't want to hurt you.'

The ogre had risen to his feet, hefting a large club. Behind her, there was a flicker of movement.

‘You cannot take her! You’ve lost your mind; they will kill you! You need me! You will starve up there within a week. You best listen to me; I can only access the tube through retinal and fingerprint scans—’

Edra cut him off mid-sentence, ripping his head from his shoulders as easily as popping a cork from a champagne bottle. The decapitated head hung limply in her hand, oozing, and dripping gore onto the floor, his body a spray can of blood as it graffitied the walls. With her free hand, she snapped off his index finger, pocketing it. Lifeless eyes stared into nothingness, shock plastered upon his features, twisted into a frozen mud mask of fear. The doorman shuffled forwards, too slow. Edra covered the distance with a dash, she leapt, her fangs puncturing his thick neck muscles. He reeled back, a huge hand clutching his spurting jugular. She spat a flap of skin onto the floor. When she turned, there was no more movement – other than the swinging of the front door. Edra coaxed the girl from under the table, taking her small hand in her own again, stepping around the convulsing body of the ogre who danced his death throes on the floor.

In a little time, they reached Finnick’s office. Edra stood in front of the metal door, Tammy’s hand nestled in one of her own, her other clutched the hair of the bloody stump. Unceremoniously, Edra held the gruesome head up for inspection. The goblin’s head stared into the scanner, unable to do anything else. The machine seemed to consider for a moment, then beeped its consent. Next, she jammed the warty, severed finger into the index scanner. The door sprung open.

After a brief inspection, Edra found what she was searching for, a door leading to a cylinder tube – a flute to travel up-world. Kneeling again, she addressed the child.

‘You were very brave. Listen to me Tammy, the bad people are coming. Go up-world.’

Tammy started to cry again. ‘No, no, please! Come with me, don’t leave me! It’s scary up there! There’s bad people up there too!’

‘I can’t. There’re bad people everywhere. You’re a survivor, I know you are. Put this on.’

There was a thud as a fist hammered on the door. Edra paid it no mind, helping the little girl into the suit hanging on a peg by the tube. The door wobbled under the assault, voices shouted, muffled.

‘You’ll need to put this on as well, to protect you from the air. Get back to your family. You can do it.’ She tried on a smile again – it felt as alien to her as breathing.

Edra ignored her objections as she gently encouraged her into the tube, pressing a button at the side. It flew open, emitting steam.

‘Go now Tammy, good luck little one.’ She smiled again. ‘Be brave.’

Tammy nodded, her head bobbing along with the strange mask. Edra’s fingers worked, smashing on the controls, flipping random dials and switches until the machine activated. The machine hissed and smoked. In an instant, the girl vanished. The door hammered again. Her eye ducts itched. In her imagination, a tear rolled down her cheek, but when she reached up to touch it, her cheeks were as barren of teardrops as a desert was barren of raindrops. Well, you’ve got yourself into it good this time. Edra slumped onto the chair by a dresser desk in the corner, withdrawing her vial of blood. It was empty, the last drops congealing around the sides. The angry beeps of rejection from the door screeched at periodic intervals. The goblin’s desecrated head was not obliging, but it was only a matter of time. Her eyes wondered and settled on a letter opener resting on the wood – silver – reflecting in the light; humming



its eerie song, yet now it seemed to call to her. She picked it up by the leather-bound handle, scrutinising the shining blade. You tried, you tried to take my humanity. Perhaps I don't have a soul, but I have a conscience. A beep of ascent finally sounded from the door. There was a pause before a mess of bodies collapsed through the door, cartwheeling over each other. Edra didn't turn. Without another thought, she turned the point inwards and plunged it into her chest. With her last breath, she whispered her daughter's name.



Akuoma moved with purpose, her left hand trembled as she held the kitchen knife. She was careful not to wake the baby.

'I am going to take you out in your sleep, you little witch,' Akuoma muttered to herself. Stealthily, she continued to make her way to the bedroom where little Joy was sleeping, unaware. By little Joy's cot, Akuoma paused.

'I'll put an end to my misery forever.' The feeling in her heart could not be ignored –it manifested in a wicked smile on her beautiful face. It was as if little Joy was in sync, smiling in her sleep, radiant and innocent.

Akuoma, on seeing the baby smile, became incensed. She moved an inch closer. Akuoma's anger boiled and with all her strength, she raised her hand, gripping the knife firmly. She was already halfway to the baby's chest when suddenly hulking footsteps approached. The quiet room flew into chaos.

'Aku! What are you doing?' Mike screamed.

Akuoma stood frozen, she dropped the knife onto the floor. Hot tears streamed down Akuoma's face.

What fate is this that I can't even deal with my problems and live my life?
The thought ruffled her stoic heart. Akuoma collapsed to the floor and moaned.

Her husband, Mike, thundered into the room and jerked her up with his strong hands

'Aku! Aku! You've gone mad, eh, have you gone crazy?' He paused to look at his wife who was vibrating from her shaking limbs.

'Ha! I am finished. What should I tell my in-laws?' Mike groused. He let go of Akuoma and looked quickly through the

room. He seemed unable to find what he was looking for and stormed out hastily. Little Joy, caught in the middle of the fiasco, began to cry. Mike stormed back into the bedroom with a big stick in his right hand. The stick lashed at Akuoma in a frenzy.

She jumped up from the floor, bleating like a goat. Just then, she felt a lump of blood in her undergarments. The sanitary pad between her legs did its job; Akuoma, who was only three weeks postpartum, was still bleeding. She wailed as the big utali lacerated her skin with each strike. Joy had become tired of crying and just watched her parents with curious eyes.

Akuoma ran out of the bedroom, towards the main entrance of the house. Fate seemed to be against her as Mike caught hold of her, just as she reached for the door knob. He grabbed her expensive silk nightie and pummelled her in all directions like cassava fufu in a mortar. Akuoma's body reacted by emitting more blood. The sanitary pad could bear it no longer and warm blood trickled down her legs as she continued to scream.

Mike beat her until he grew tired. Akuoma fell against the corner of the room below their framed wedding picture. That was the corner her husband had pinned her into, to give her an overdose of his wrath.

Mike left her in that corner and picked up Joy, whose voice was almost lost from overuse. She sounded like a meowing cat, and Mike could smell that she had soiled herself. He cursed under his breath, 'evil woman,' before reaching for the box of Huggies diapers. Mike had made sure to buy the best of everything for the baby, whom they'd wished for four years to have. He had also spent money on Next clothes, Marks and Spencer, and Gap while on his business trips to the United Kingdom.

‘This baby will have the best of everything, Aku my darling. I will not play with her and will not spare anyone who tampers with her,’ he repeatedly told Akuoma, using her special nickname.

Mike ensured that Akuoma wore the most expensive maternity dresses that he could buy. Akuoma loathed dresses and had an affinity for trousers because they were comfortable. She was left with no choice, though. Mike believed that trousers, with suspensions around the waist area, would endanger the life of their unborn child. The child was paramount, so whether Akuoma liked dresses or not was inconsequential in the man’s mind.

As Mike cleaned Joy’s bottom, those memories raced through his mind. Mike remembered how his wife Akuoma was very excited about having a baby after a long wait. ‘How could this have happened, God?’ Mike asked.

He grabbed his car keys from the table and drove off with little Joy, dropping her off at his mum’s house. ‘Your grandchild has come to stay with you, Mum,’ he said as he arrived at the house. ‘Aku needs a little rest because she has the flu. We can’t risk the baby getting sick. She will have to stay with you for a few days.’ Mike’s Mum watched him, a crease formed between her eyebrows.

‘Well, please take care of my daughter-in-law,’ she remarked moodily, as she cared deeply about the fate of her family. Mike couldn’t bring himself to say his wife had wanted to kill their child.

Akuoma staggered to her feet. Her body ached. She had stained the floor with blood, but didn’t notice as she wobbled to the bedroom she shared with her husband. Akuoma had a shower and took care of herself rather meekly. She felt a twinge in her breasts and her thoughts went to little Joy. She was dumbfounded when she found the cot empty. ‘Joy!’ She screamed. Akuoma broke anguish.

'My baby, my baby... God, forgive me please!' She cried.

Akuoma was an intelligent young architect. She had worked her way up to be the assistant director of her company before she fell pregnant. She was used to dressing up smartly whether she was in the office or not. She always wore flawless makeup. Akuoma was a woman who always looked pristine and well put together.

She stopped yelling and her thoughts veered to when she had first found out she was pregnant. Akuoma was overjoyed, she begged Mike to name the baby, Joy. Akuoma savoured every stage of the pregnancy, she marvelled at the changes her body underwent. She longed to be a mother.

She ran her hands down the sides of the cot. She presumed Mike had taken the baby with him. 'Where did he go?' She asked the empty room. Her upper nightie was stained with breast milk. So she walked back to the bedroom to get a breast pad.

The enlarged image of herself on the wall caught her attention. She stared at it for some time, almost unable to recognize herself.

Akuoma had gone downhill when Joy was born. She had envisioned a radiant motherhood. She had dreamt of dressing in her favourite outfit and pushing her baby in a pram. But all that anticipation died shortly after the birth. The very first time she looked at Joy, Akuoma was so delighted, but after a week had passed, something changed. The momentary joy and happiness vanished, and depression took its place.

Tears rolled down her face as she continued to look at the picture of herself. A strong feeling of anger and resentment swept over her. Akuoma rushed out of the bedroom and headed towards the dining room. She pulled one of the dining room chairs into the bedroom and climbed onto it.

She unhooked the portrait on the wall and smashed it to the floor. Next, she went to Joy's bedroom and threw everything that belonged to the baby across the room.

'Evil child... evil child.' Akuoma muttered.

Mike's hands clenched the steering wheel, his foot pressed firmly on the pedal. Mike was thinking about Akuoma, he was convinced his wife was going mad but he couldn't figure out why.

'Akuoma is mad,' Mike whispered. 'Wait, maybe it runs in her family? Why didn't I ask her about her family's health before marrying her?'

Akuoma sat on her bed and stared into space. Her heart was broken. She stirred as she heard the sound of Mike's car in the compound.

By the time Mike unlocked the front door and walked in, Akuoma had already disappeared quietly through the back door. She did not wear slippers for fear of being heard, rather walking barefooted on the tips of her toes to make her exit. She hid in a bush close to their house.

'Akuoma! Akuoma!' Mike bellowed.

Mike searched the whole neighbourhood and finally came close to where Akuoma was hiding. Akuoma's uncontrollable sobs gave her away. Mike surreptitiously snuck closer to the sound of the sobs and his heart melted. The image of his wife snivelling, shook his core. *I love my wife*, his thoughts echoed through him, *I love my wife, and Aku is my life*.

I will get her back, Mike decided as he advanced. He got very close and waited in silence.

*

Akuoma continued to listen for sounds. She was sure no one was passing and thought it a perfect time to come out of her hiding. She stood up from her crouched position and walked into Mike's arms. She knew she wanted to escape from the bush but never thought she would end up in her husband's arms.

'No! No!' Akuoma started crying. Her wails had caused a group of passersby to gather in front their shops and houses; they gazed in awe as the film unfolded. Everyone had seen them as one without problems, they were the bread-and-butter type of couple that all envied.

What then is the meaning of this? They asked in their minds. Mike was holding Akuoma firmly, dragging her toward their home.

'Oga, abeg take am easy,' the people were saying to Mike in Pidgin English. Akuoma fought all she could but was overpowered by her husband. She succumbed and quietly walked with him to the house.

Back in their bungalow, Mike encouraged Akuoma to put on more befitting clothing. Standing beside her, Mike placed a hand on Akuoma's delicate shoulder and tried to help her put on her clothes.

'Let go of me, let go!' Akuoma screamed immediately. She sprayed Mike with dry shampoo and rushed into the living room. Mike had planned to take her to the hospital, but changed his mind.

Aku is clearly mad, she needs more than a doctor, this looks like a spiritual attack and she needs to be freed. The best place to take her will be a prayer house, Mike reasoned with himself.

Overdressed, Akuoma danced deliriously into the room. Mike's eyes dropped and his head fell. 'There's no time to waste,' he said resolutely as he moved towards her.

Akuoma raised her short skirt to reveal her exposed private parts. Mike swore as he dashed to get a hold of her but she hit him on

the head by the high-heeled shoe she had just removed. Akuoma rushed to little Joy's bedroom. With great strength, she shook the cot until one side of it shattered.

'Where is my sketching? This isn't what I sketched,' the woman shouted. Mike went close to her, Akuoma was oblivious.

Mike fought back tears. *What has gone wrong with the girl that was so perfect? Is this the price I will pay for being a father?* Mike exhaled and called, 'Baby, baby, look at me, please. What is the problem?'

Akuoma glanced at him, bewildered, as if seeing him for the first time. She looked away and continued talking to herself. Mike put his arm around her shoulder.

'You will be fine Aku, and I will make sure of that.' Without warning, Akuoma grabbed a piece of wood from the cot and hit Mike hard on his wrist. He winced and took some steps back. He fumbled seconds later to find his car keys. Amidst scratches and punches, he dragged Akuoma out of the house, to the car.

Mike pushed Akuoma into the car and drove speedily till he reached in front of a big black gate. On top of the gate read, 'The Amazing Centre'. He dragged Akuoma into the compound, her wails of 'Leave me, let go of me,' echoed throughout the empty area. Mike persevered in his mission to free and deliver his wife from the evil spirit tormenting her.

Before they reached the door, a long-bearded man emerged, dressed in a red priestly robe. He raised his hand, motioning Mike to leave Akuoma alone. He picked a can of 'blessed powder' from his side and poured some on his hands. The man blew it towards Akuoma who was gyrating her hips in an erratic dance. Instantly, Akuoma fell to the ground and shut her eyes.

*

Akuoma was gone for five weeks. He was banned from visiting The Amazing Centre for the entirety of her stay. This was so, the evil spirit haunting Akuoma didn't enter him. Mike had waited for the day she would come home. He was full of hope at the idea of seeing his wife sane, again. It was with such high spirit that he drove to the prayer house.

As he stepped closer to Akuoma, he stopped dead. Her hair was in dreadlocks, her body covered in flog marks and smelly wounds. Akuoma's eyes were also swollen. Where a full-fledged architect should have lain, was a soulless heap, waiting for its next feed: a bowl of unwarranted blows.

Mike looked hard, his vision blurred. Was this the treatment he was hoping for? A treatment that left his wife dying of hunger and maltreatment? He went closer to Akuoma. Mike indeed anticipated some crazy antics but got none, not even a glance. Akuoma was fading away quickly.

In a dash, Mike raced back to his car. He made a rapid phone call to his old classmate, Doctor Uche, a renowned gynaecologist. Arrangements were made as Dr Uche sent his hospital's ambulance for Akuoma. To the disappointment of the owner of The Amazing Centre, Akuoma was bundled into the ambulance and sped away, en-route to the hospital.

As Mike left Akuoma's hospital room, he didn't know what to do. He was tired of living like a bachelor in his house. He wondered if Akuoma would ever improve. He couldn't answer all the questions in his mind. Mike decided to drown his sorrows at a Palmie Joint; a local bar where palm wine was sold with African salad. He did not enjoy the dish that was usually delicious.

Mike gulped down one glass of palm wine after another until he started seeing some uninvited spirits. Yet, it was a very sober

version of himself that entered his car and drove ever so slowly home, to his solitude.

It happened in a week – what Mike had waited five weeks for. When he entered Akuoma’s private hospital room, he was overwhelmed. Mike couldn’t believe what he saw. Akuoma was smiling weakly as she listened to the psychologist in front of her. On seeing Mike, she grinned widely. She had been properly washed and her hair had been shampooed.

Dr Uche explained to Mike in detail how his wife had suffered postpartum depression. He explained that most women experience it after childbirth. Dr Uche was disappointed that Mike, with his high level of education, made the decision to take his wife to a prayer house, instead of seeking help from the right source.

The doctor discussed ‘baby blues,’ which Akuoma attested to having experienced for a couple of weeks after the birth of little Joy. Mike nodded with understanding as he recalled the many occasions on which he’d found Akuoma tearful and capricious.

Doctor Uche explained that Akuoma saw the baby as a threat to her continuing success as a budding architect. Her psychological state wanted to remove the obstacle before it.

‘She dearly loves little Joy,’ Dr Uche emphasized.

‘I am so ashamed of myself,’ Mike said, collapsing into a chair. ‘How did I not even think of this? So, will she ever be completely ok?’

The doctor smiled and assured him Akuoma’s psyche would be fully restored.

‘The psychologist will be visiting regularly to speak with her at home. Some antidepressants have also been included in her prescription,’ he said, giving Mike some paperwork. He advised Mike to show a lot of support and love to Akuoma. She should be helped to ease back into her career and generally return to

her pre-birth life as much as possible. The baby should not be a hindrance to her—it was not meant to be. ‘Show her that she can still sail through life successfully, although at a slower pace,’ Dr Uche admonished.

‘I can’t thank you enough, bro,’ Mike said to the doctor. ‘I don’t know why you decided to go on vacation at my wife’s EDD. If you had been in the country, she would have delivered in your hospital. I am sure then all these things wouldn’t have happened.’

Dr Uche smiled and patted his shoulders reassuringly. ‘Everything will be alright, my brother. I promise to be here for your second child.’ Mike gave his old classmate a grateful smile.

Four months later, Akuoma stood on a site at Jakande Estate, Lagos, her healthy baby strapped to her chest. She moved her hands, explaining to the engineers the plan she had drawn. One of the engineers made a joke. Akuoma threw her braided head back and roared with laughter. ‘This is my plan; I want it to retain its originality.’

ANDREA ULIBARRENA

Lovestruck

My dearest Jane,

How are you, my love? Oh! I can scarcely explain how desperately and terribly I miss you! How I long to see your beautiful face again! It has been less than two months since we saw each other last, and yet it feels like an eternity. I begged and *begged* Papa to let me visit you this winter, but he remains firm in his resolution that we not do any more travelling until summer, at least. I am certain I shall go mad with impatience before then, for there is nothing I desire more than to be in your company. Oh, Jane! I am certain I am still as lovestruck as the day we met. Every night I go to sleep thinking of your beautiful eyes and wake up thinking of your smile.

I've been thinking of the first time I saw you, that wonderful summer the year I turned sixteen. Papa and I were visiting your uncle, eager to make the acquaintance of the niece now living with him. We entered the drawing room – and there you were, sitting in a window seat with the afternoon sun lighting your blond curls up like spun gold, a cup of tea clasped in your delicate hand.

You looked at me directly and smiled, all dimples and sweetness. Oh, I am certain I became lovestruck that very moment! You looked exactly like an angel that had fallen out of Heaven.

We spent hours and hours in each other's company that summer, running around the meadows of the estate, picking apples in the orchard, playing with your uncle's three gorgeous golden retrievers, and having delightful conversations in your treehouse. I had never had a friend like you. It was *glorious*.

The evening before Papa and I were due to travel back home, you and I climbed to that small, cramped treehouse. The sky was a gorgeous pink, the sun bright orange as we lay down on our stomachs, side by side, our arms touching. I was thrilled by the closeness. We played a game: we took it turns to flick pebbles into a small groove in the wooden floor. Every time we failed, we had to do whatever the other asked us to. You went first – and failed. Smiling, you turned to look at me. Your face was mere inches from mine.

Suddenly, I couldn't breathe.

You felt the same way, didn't you? Your lovely round cheeks went pink, and your voice was quiet and breathless as you asked, 'So? What do you want me to do?'

And I knew that no words were needed. I simply kissed you.

We kissed until the sun went down, until the world turned dark, velvety blue, until the air grew chill and your governess started calling for us. Oh, it was such an incredible moment! It still replays over and over in my dreams.

Sadly, we had to part ways the next day, but we kept up a close correspondence. While I missed you awfully, your thrillingly passionate letters made me feel that there was barely any distance between us at all. It was wondrous – especially as summer drew closer and we would be together again soon.

But then you gave me the dreadful news. You were to be married – to a man who you had never met. It was settled. The wedding date was set for autumn. You would be the wife of someone else.

Papa and I arrived at your country house, and while I was overjoyed to see you, I was grieved by the amount of time you spent alone with your suitor. It took me less than a day to ascertain that you did not love him the way he loved you – you talked and

laughed and went on long walks with him, but I could see in your downcast eyes that you were not happy.

He could never make you happy.

But I could.

I resolved I had to do something.

It was so simple to ask him to accompany me as I walked into town. I claimed I wanted to know my best friend's future husband better, and who could argue with that? It was so simple to persuade him to walk along the cliffs with me, enjoying the fresh sea air.

So simple to trip him up with my boot and send him sprawling over the edge of the cliff.

Oh, you were so shocked when I told you! Your whole face went red and you said nothing for a long time, until finally you whispered, 'You killed him? You killed him in cold blood?'

I nodded, smile unmoving. 'Yes! Now we can be together, my dear! You're *mine*. Forever and always.'

I reached for you, but you backed away. Your eyes were wide, your breath came out in shallow gasps, your hands clasped together and visibly shaking. 'Stay away from me,' you said. 'I – you – oh, dear lord, you're a *monster*.'

I know you didn't mean it. You were startled, but now you understand that it was the right thing to do, don't you? I did it so you would be happy. I did it for *us*.

Why won't you reply to my letters, Jane? This is the tenth one I've sent in the past few months. You haven't responded to a single one. I miss you so very terribly, my love.

Are you still upset? Do you miss your suitor? I know you didn't love him; you loved *me*. I know because you kissed me. You're *mine*, Jane. You're mine, and no-one else's.

Why won't you reply?

I don't understand why Papa made us leave your home as soon as I told him what I'd done. He's been so strange lately – he insists on us not leaving the estate at all, and sometimes he looks so scared. He insists I should not have any contact with others until I'm 'better'. I don't understand what he means by 'better'; I feel perfectly fine. He doesn't even like me sending letters. I'm having to write this in secrecy, which is rather thrilling.

Oh, Jane! I want you more than I've ever wanted anything before.

Why won't you write to me?

Please write to me.

Write to me.

WRITE TO ME.

Please.

I miss you so very desperately.

Yours,

XX

LOUISE USHER

How To Do Nothing

Yesterday, work had been challenging. And then Mum's 'stuff' became a challenge too.

She has heart failure. The nurse came to see her. They had asked me to be present as Mum needed another ECG. Getting her metal accessories off was a challenge. So much jewellery.

'Is your bra underwired?' the nurse asked.

'Don't ask me, wouldn't have a clue,' Mum replied. And she wouldn't. She never seemed to know the features and benefits of a good bra. And it seems to not matter now. She's 82. It matters if it has metal, which affects the ECG. It doesn't really matter what her boobs look like, in the scheme of things.

The nurse was stressed. She was thirty minutes late. I was thankful she came at all. She was in my diary. But I can't be sure of many things these days. My memory isn't what it used to be. So, here we were, late, rushing and fumbling about in a house that felt like a sauna.

Nooks and crannies, a broken ECG machine, no internet, no phone signal, a sweaty nurse, an unhelpful Mum, and a daughter who was listing the symptoms, lack of symptoms and current sleeping pattern,

'Yes, that's all fine. But I will ask symptoms in a little while,' she told me.

The armchair wasn't squishy, like mine, but it was good enough to support my slump backwards, as I surrendered to my tiredness. Sigh. What a day. My fringe covered the back of my hand as I rubbed my forehead. Headache. Again.

After an hour, and lots of handwriting, the nurse left. 51 BPM. Slow again. 90 spo2. Low again. She blames the nail varnish, like most of them. But it's been the same for 5 years, nail varnish or not. And, no, apparently, she doesn't have COPD, despite her smoking history.

I refrain from mentioning that I'm taking my Doctorate in Health Sciences. They don't like that. They would far rather I just randomly tapped into Dr Google and was a busy body know-it-all.

Okay.

Can't be bothered to protest. Mum is happy enough. And apparently ready to go see Dad and my brother. So, I have given up the fight, just a little.

'I'll just check your fridge Mum, then I'll pop to see Harley.' Mum was happy with all of that. Her cup of 'fuss' was full.

Harley was so vocal. Going round in circles as if he had a couple of vodka and tonics, yapping as he went. Twelve and a half now. Bless him. My heart melted as he asked me to stroke him, first in line, despite him being alone all morning. There and then, I decided we were going out. We both needed it.

I could work from Starbucks, and he could sit in the floor-to-ceiling window and watch the world, and other dogs, go by. Both of us were as excited as each other.

Americano. Water. He had first dibs on the water. That was so cute. An Instagram moment was my initial thought. Then I decided I would sit and hold him on my lap like a toddler. Since he couldn't walk so well, his feet were dusty and black. I touched his paw. It flipped backwards and forwards in my hand as the joint acted like a hinge. I got lost in this moment, and flipped his paws



about some more, smiling to myself and chatting quietly to him. My left hand reached into my bag and pulled out my Metaphysical book. I should read. I hadn't worked enough. I set the book on the table and adjusted Harley's position on my lap. His paws, somehow, ended up in the palm of my hand again.

This was most unusual, but I had an urge to sit with him, drink my coffee and flip his paws about. I could have squeezed him with my love. A happy moment. My dog, me, the coffee, doing nothing.

SZANDRA VETESI

Code Cherry

It doesn't matter how long you wish to run. . . at the end, every soul reaches a dream, from where they can't ever escape. These thoughts lingered in my head as I walked through the dim corridor. A cold shiver rattled my bare shoulders. I wore a black, lacy dress, heavily decorated with black crystals and ruffles, my long, brown hair curled to my right. Although it was quite a nuisance, I wore the hairpin that Oliver gave me. I hated it, it was uncomfortable and quite frankly, an ugly accessory, but I couldn't afford to go against his will, at least not yet. Oliver was on a completely different level; he was the strongest amongst us, perhaps the strongest one of our kind. Don't get me wrong, I was grateful to him, after all the things he had done for me; if it weren't for him, I would still be wandering alone, and a lone vampire does not last long out there. Yet, I had to be careful, thanks to my fierce nature, I constantly danced on a thin layer of ice, and was never in his favour for long. You see, life is unjust; at least it certainly is from my point of view. The problem lays in the very foundation of things, in a truth that I personally reject, but must accept; that people aren't born equal, and this reality remains relevant even after death. The more you fight against it, the deeper your foot falls and believe me, I have been stumbling on one foot for a while.

As I was getting closer to the hall, I could hear the music and see the lights. It was the twenty-ninth of October, which was known to us as Pray Night. Unlike the common fairy tales, vampires are not allowed to attack humans under any circumstances. This has been the law for decades to keep my kind at bay, and perhaps more importantly, to quell human suspicion and curiosity about



vampires. However, this night was different; Pray Night was like our Christmas, where we hold a ball to celebrate life, and end the night with multiple deaths. I know that this sounds very controversial, but this night is about granting a wish of the desperate, as those that we prey upon, are human beings with terminal illnesses or an unchangeable death wish. Such irony, when the children of the darkest nights become merciful gods.

I sensed the presence of fellow vampires; it wasn't hard to picture them in my head, all of them in their fancy dresses hiding behind their masks and slurping on expensive wines, for now at least. An ocean of hungry eyes hunting for their first kill; the image almost reverberating in front of my eyes. Their excitement was so great that it was almost visceral. I fixed my mask properly before I entered the room. Huge crystal chandeliers sparkled on the ceiling, freshly-cut red roses decorated the hall with bows and ribbons, and the colour of blood dominated the space. The mansion was built sometime in the late eighteen-hundreds, but continued to honour the beautiful style of baroque. I looked around and, although it wasn't the first Night I had attended, I was still amazed by the effort spent on the event.



'Charlotte!' Sebastian shouted my name as he stood at the bottom of the stairs. His attire was a lot more colourful than mine, his beige, satin ruffled shirt complemented his darker skin tone, and his extravagant long velvet coat with gold embroidery suited him very well. I rushed to his side, and he held his arm out for me to hold onto. His muscles were hard, like rock; he had been tough in his human existence, and the strength of his body seemed to have increased itself extensively. Rumour had it, he was indeed so powerful, that one punch was all he needed to destroy London's Big Ben. But what I appreciated about him the most wasn't his

supernatural strength, but the gentle heart he managed to maintain even as a vampire.

‘Excited about the night?’ he beamed at me as we walked down the stairs. I could feel the sharp glares of the others, making us aware that they didn’t approve of our friendship. Although, it annoyed me, I acknowledged their reasons that reminded me of just how human we vampires really were. Rejecting something that couldn’t be understood, refusing to accept those who are different, that was the kind of mentality most brought with them after their deaths. Some have automatically adapted to the vampire attitudes which reminded me of my human years. Uncertainty, distrust, and fear were the emotions we had buried deep down in our rotten souls. Hence why they thought of Sebastian and I as outsiders, as ticking bombs they needed to be wary of; they simply just couldn’t understand the basic principles of holding together.

‘Oh, I’m thrilled.’ I answered flatly, while smiling and nodding to everyone we passed by.

‘That doesn’t sound promising,’ he whispered to me while greeting the crowd.

‘I can’t help it. You know I’m both excited and disgusted by this butchery.’

‘I’d be careful with your words Charlotte, Oliver might hear you.’ Sebastian passed me a glass of wine that he grabbed from a waiter. ‘Cheers!’ He raised his glass and took a sip from the wine; I watched as the red liquid entered his lips, and I could almost taste that crimson drop of nectar in my own mouth.

‘So, where are they? The humans?’ I asked curiously, after tasting my wine.

‘They should be amongst us already. All but one should be wearing a blue brooch on the left side of their chest,’ Sebastian



explained, while scanning the crowd to point one of them out to me. I turned my head too, looking for a hint of blue, but I couldn't see anyone with one on. 'There!' Sebastian grabbed my shoulders. 'She's wearing one.' I followed his index finger which pointed to a slim girl; she wore a tiara-like ornament in her coiled hair and a lilac, chiffon dress which complemented her figure. As she turned, I could see the brooch. She wore an embellished mask; I couldn't tell exactly how old she was, but my guess would be late twenties or early thirties. Despite knowing that our prey are usually from various backgrounds regarding age, gender, and all sorts of factors, I still find myself surprised every year. Seeing a young woman like her made me question: what was she doing here? Then, I instantly realised just how much looks mislead our judgement. She wore the brooch, meaning she had signed her contract with Oliver, and as I was familiar with the process, I knew exactly how she got here. Prey, I need to call them that even if it makes me feel guilty, are picked based on whether they are either ill or want to die. After, they have been assessed and have confirmed their choice, their final step is to sign a contract with their blood, binding them to their decision. On the morning of Pray Night, they are wiped clean of their memories and their suffering, so, when they arrive, they don't have any worries; all they know is that something wonderful is happening to them, something they have been waiting for a long time. This is the purpose of the night of last wishes, the reason why it is called Pray Night.

'I think I'll greet her.' Sebastian took another sip of his wine and smiled; he couldn't take his eyes off of that girl.

'Go on!' I pushed him encouragingly, as I didn't want him to lose out on his fun.

‘One more thing.’ He turned towards me. ‘The one with the cherry-coloured brooch is taboo, that one is Oliver’s prey. Stay clear!’ He winked at me, but I saw a slight worry in his eyes. Then he grinned and waved goodbye for the night.

‘Right, cherry is a no-no.’ I understood his message clearly, what belonged to Oliver was his, and his alone. I decided to roam around the hall to enjoy the music and the parade. I watched the crowd as they danced to the sweet melody; women in their magnificent dresses looked like goddesses gliding along the floor. No one paid attention to the time, as the night was just getting started. I deliberately avoided dancing with others, but I couldn’t help moving along to the rhythm, it wasn’t just the mood, but perhaps the alcohol was starting to affect me as well. The hall was getting rather crowded, and that’s when I unwittingly bumped into someone

‘Please excuse my clumsiness.’ I turned towards the masked stranger.

‘No, excuse me, it was my fault,’ he apologised. I quickly examined him; he was a tall guy wearing an outfit that perfectly matched mine. His mask was velvet black, decorated with feathers and crystals, but what caught my attention was the way his eyes sparkled at me. Those wonderful, dark brown eyes, I was sure I had never encountered this man before. Could he be the one? But as my eyes drifted to his chest, I could see no brooch at all. A strange tingle ran through my body, and I felt the inside of my stomach warming, an unfamiliar feeling playing with my senses. I reminded myself to be careful, not to let anything get the best of me. I broke our eye contact and smiled.

‘No problem,’ I said awkwardly, hitching up my long skirt to take my leave as fast as I can, but he grabbed my hand, in which I held my empty glass.

‘Wouldn’t you like another one?’ He smiled and took a step closer to me.

‘I... shouldn’t.’ I hesitated, my words feeling cemented to my throat, and I was fairly sure that he used some sort of a spell on me.

‘In that case, would you grant me a dance?’ He removed the glass from my grip and handed it to a waiter who was walking past. The stranger gently held out his hand to me, his fingers barely touching mine.

‘Sure, but only one dance.’ I couldn’t refuse him, something made me follow. He guided me to the middle of the dance floor, placed a steady palm on my waist, and started to lead my body to the beat of band’s melody. It felt natural, as if we had danced through our lives together, even if I was certain I had never met him before. I liked the way he moved, the smell of his cologne, the feel of his velvet coat; most of all, I loved the way he looked at me. I saw a passion in his eyes, something I had never seen in anyone else’s. He charmed me and I wanted to be charmed by his magic. We danced and danced, one song after the other, as if we wanted this night to last forever. The crowd kept changing around us, colours and scents appearing then disappearing, some of them faded forever as I dismissed the world around me. He pulled me closer to him, and there was only a small gap between the two of us. I could feel his heart drumming against my chest, smell the blood that flowed through his veins, and that scent startled me. He smelled like the brink of death; he was like a flower that had only one petal left. That only could mean one thing.

He was a human.

I forced him away from me, and he nudged another couple dancing behind him. The crowd around us stopped and watched us curiously. I curtsied my gratitude, and dashed away from him, out

of the hall. I needed some fresh air, I needed the cold of October to cool my racing heart and spellbound mind. I was so entranced that it didn't occur to me that the magnificent stranger was a human. I felt disappointed in myself. I ran until the railing of the balcony finally stopped me, my breathing was rapid, my thoughts swirling so violently in my mind, that I didn't notice that he had followed me.

'Are you okay?'

The sudden sound of his voice shocked me, and I turned to face him.

'Who are you?' I asked ferociously, but he didn't seem to mind it. He closed the distance between us, and in that very moment I felt like a prey, and that he was the predator.

'Morgan Cho. That's my name.' His voice was calm and natural as if it was a casual conversation in a casual scenario, but it wasn't, and I had a bad feeling.

'I don't recall anyone with this name. Hold on, how are you able to remember your full name? It should have been erased.' I questioned him, bewilderedly.

'It was my wish not to,' he confessed, and my heart sunk.

'What about your memories?' I interrogated him further.

'I have them all,' Morgan admitted.

'That's just impossible, Oliver wouldn't willingly agree to that.'

'Oh, but I did, sweet Charlotte.'

The air froze around us, and I would say that probably everyone could feel Oliver's presence in the mansion now. He was just as intimidating as usual, but he seemed a lot more infuriated this time; I sensed his anger radiating around him. He looked like he wanted to rip us apart, and honestly, he could have, but he seemed to be controlling his powers. I would be a fool to say that I wasn't afraid, but I was, unlike Morgan. He just carried on looking at

me, never taking his eyes off, not even for a moment, as if Oliver's presence didn't even matter to him.

'Oliver.' I gritted my teeth.

'You look fabulous, my dear.' In a blink of an eye, he was standing behind me. His cold fingers wrapped around the curve of my neck, his lips next to my left ear; I could feel the chill of his breath on my cheek.

'What do you think of him? Don't you find him amusing? Unlike the rest of his pitiful kind, he chooses to remember,' Oliver smirked.

'I didn't think that was a matter of choice.' I looked over at Morgan who didn't move, he looked like he was cursed and losing control over his body; a lifeless puppet and Oliver held onto the strings tightly.

'But, my dear, your entire life depends on your choices. Haven't you learned that yet?' His voice was as sharp as a double-edged sword, his words like poison; he was the master of his concoctions. Life was a game to him and everyone around him were his pawns; easily replaceable, some useful, and some useless. I had an interchangeable position, sometimes I amused him, other times I irked him. But right now, he wanted to end us both.

'Did you perhaps begin to like him?'

'Perhaps. Does that bother you at all?' I goaded, and felt his grip tighten around my neck, but I couldn't hold myself back. Feeling like a chased mouse, this certainly wasn't a situation I felt comfortable with, and I certainly didn't like him toying with me like a bored cat.

'Not at all. Go ahead, my sweet Charlotte,' Oliver sneered, and let go of me. He made a gesture with his hand for me to drain Morgan's blood; he wanted to see me losing my mind and killing the man in front of him. Oliver had a twisted sense of humour, for sure.

‘Why does he seem important to you?’ I asked, still facing Morgan. I had so many questions I needed answers for.

‘Don’t you think you’re asking too many questions lately?’ Oliver retorted, impatiently.

He rushed towards Morgan and pointed his index finger right at Morgan’s heart.

‘He’s different from the others.’ Oliver traced his finger upwards, towards Morgan’s neck, and pressed his sharp nails into the soft skin, tearing his flesh ever so slightly. Beads of blood streamed down his throat and I felt my eyes flashing red, my tastebuds were bursting in anticipation at the smell of Morgan’s blood, but so did Oliver’s; he craved the taste of the red liquid he had just spilled.

‘Inhale his scent, and find your own answers.’

Begrudgingly, I inhaled the smell and dived deep into Morgan’s memories. I saw him as a young child, then growing into his adolescence, and I felt my heart squeezing in sorrow at what I had seen. I witnessed him giving up on his dreams and stepping on paths he shouldn’t have. I felt his desperation, his ever-growing pain that he carried on his shoulders. Then, I saw the day when the doctors told him he didn’t have much time to live. My eyes couldn’t hold my tears back anymore. His life was the opposite of my human life, yet we shared the same despair. Misery comes in all shapes and forms; while I was born into a family of pagan runaways during the era of the witch hunts, struggling to find food, Morgan had the peaceful life I yearned for as a child. Whilst, I watched my family die of disease or being slaughtered by the hands of criminals, he had something seemingly reminiscent of a normal childhood. What had turned him so bitter?

‘Now you see, he was a people-pleaser his whole life. Never taking charge of his own happiness, chasing meaningless goals and carrying the burdens of his family for generations. Yet, on the very

last day of his life, he made up his mind. He wanted to stare death in the eye,' Oliver said, bored.

'You need to spare his life,' I cried, helplessly. 'Oliver, I...'

'Are you going to beg me? That's unusual of you. You're the only one who has never once begged me for anything,' he interrupted.

'But maybe, if... maybe he could...'

'He has no time left. Today is his last day. He will die just after midnight.' Oliver noticed that some of Morgan's blood stained his fingers. He lifted his hand to breathe in the metallic aroma, then wiped his hand clean with Morgan's coat. His gesture didn't make any sense to me.

'Where is his cherry brooch?' I demanded.

'His brooch? Well, he doesn't have one.' He smiled wickedly, while picking at his long, sharp nails disinterestedly.

'I thought that he must be the one.' I was confused. If Morgan wasn't the human Oliver had claimed as his property, then who was it? And if so, why did he even come after us?

'Oh, my dear Charlotte, how could he be the one? The ornament you are looking for is better suited for your hair. Why would I give it to him?' That was when I realised that the distasteful hairpin that secured my fringe, was encrusted with cherry-coloured gems, and lined with onyx stones. Everything seemed clear now. Why had I never thought of that before?

'So, you gave it to me as a token of death. That's a horrible present to gift a woman, although I must say it's very fitting of you.' He had already declared his plan to kill me, there was no point in holding myself back any longer. I felt hatred and anger wash away my fears. He was out for my blood tonight, but I had no intention of dying. He lunged forward, outstretched arms and claws pointing straight for my heart, but I quickly jumped to the side.

‘Why fight back? You are weak and helpless, Charlotte,’ he snarled, his mad eyes staring angrily at me. He had dropped his façade; he was nothing more than a blood-thirsty monster that I had to overcome.

‘If I am as weak as you have made me out to be, why were you afraid of me?’

‘Don’t make me laugh, I wasn’t scared, but I have to admit that you are rather rebellious. A pest of the worst kind. Rebels are the most dangerous kind of people, they have an immeasurable sense of justice and no matter how hard you try to break their spirit, they bounce right back and fight. Annoying trash,’ he spat.

‘That sounds about right.’

I don’t even know what made me smile in that moment, but it felt like the world had turned upside down, and I preferred it that way. I finally realised that it wasn’t me who danced on that thin layer of cracking ice; it was Oliver, and I knew he’d eventually drown. He jumped at me again, but this time I stood my ground and attacked back. I held my arms out and gathered my energy. Unbeknownst to Oliver, I had been training hard to improve myself, so that I’d be able to take him on one day. I focused on the windows around us. I felt a complete resonance with the glass, and with a single sweep of my hand, I had shattered them to pieces and flung them towards us. The loud noise had removed the curse over Morgan, who looked at me and shouted my name. I aimed at Oliver and made sure not to miss. Thousands of jagged glass debris pierced his flesh, but I knew that wouldn’t be enough. I had to finish what I started. I controlled the shards of glass, cutting cleanly through his body so that I could finish him off, once and for all. Oliver screamed and laughed maniacally, as if he still thought he was invincible.

‘This won’t be enough to kill me!’

We locked eyes, and I could still see his burning desire to kill me. Perhaps Morgan did too, because before I could do anything more, he charged towards Oliver and made sure he was in close range.

'Morgan!' I yelled his name and hurried to his aid. Oliver turned towards him, but before he could reach him, Morgan grabbed one of the fiery torches that lit the balcony and struck Oliver's face with the hot fire. His hair and clothing caught fire instantly, and his chilling roars of pain cut through the air. I clutched Morgan's hand and pulled him, leading him through the garden, which I knew would take us to the street.

'Will he die now?' Morgan asked, following me.

'Maybe. He is the strongest after all, but what matters most is that you saved me.'

I smiled and looked at him, but then an idea popped into my head, and so I faced him, seized my mask and yanked it off my face. I wanted him to see me, to know what I looked like. He echoed my actions and removed his too. His face was handsome, but tired; he must have been in a lot of pain, yet he didn't say a word. My heart grieved for him; I wished I could do something to help, but when the sound of the bells reached our ears, I realised we had run out of time. It was already midnight.

'Morgan.'

'Shouldn't we run a little longer?' he asked me, and I nodded.

'Lead the way!' I told him. So, he grabbed my hand and this time, he pulled me after him. We ran for a while, freely, and far away from Pray Night. We turned into narrow alleys and entered broader roads, we must have run for about half an hour, when Morgan stopped, his legs gave way, and he collapsed onto the cold concrete outside of Westminster Abbey. I tried to catch him, and softly lay him down, so that he could place his head on my lap.

Now, there was nothing left; I watched that delicate flower letting its last lone petal slowly fall, saying its final goodbyes as it slips out of the grip of its bud. Morgan looked at me once again, his eyes still shining, and I felt empty. That not even the Sun will shine so brightly ever again, that nothing can compete with his light. He raised his hand, gently touching my face for the last time. I just sat there, holding his dying body in my arms and I couldn't do anything but cry in anguish. Oh, how cruel life really was that night.

'Thank you,' he whispered, and I wanted to tell him not to. I wished for him to hang onto his life a little longer, I wanted him to fight, but I realised there was no need for such selfish words. It was Morgan's time to go.

'No. Thank you for the dance. I had a wonderful night.'

'Charlotte, there is something I want you to know.'

'I'm listening,' I started to stroke his head sombrely, my fingers running through his silky, dark hair. I smiled tearfully at him, and nodded for him to carry on.

'In my thirty-five years of life, there was only one night I felt alive. I wish I could have dared to live a little sooner. Maybe, I would have found you too.'

'But you have lived a lot more during this one and only night, than most do in their entire lives,' I told him.

'You think so?' he smiled.

'Don't you worry, fool. You have chased your stars tonight.' I breathed these words tenderly into his ear. He continued to smile, then closed his eyes shut. An overwhelming sense of emptiness and peace filled my heart. I lowered my lips to reach his and sent him away with a gentle kiss.

S M WHITMAN

Homecoming

Near our house, and not that near the sea, lay a stranded boat slowly rotting in a green field. It had often served as a meeting place and one day Martin Harris and I sat in the boat with our legs lying together, looking up at an ominous grey sky and listening to the sounds of people shrieking and laughing on the rec nearby. It was summer but, of course, rain threatened. We didn't mind.

Martin was smoking. Actually, we were both smoking. I don't smoke usually but that day more than any other I didn't want him to feel alone. Of all of us, I was the one chosen to try to talk to him. There was no vote – no one asked me to do it – it just seemed right. Both of us had been away from home for a long period of time, both of us had just had our first exposure to people other than those we'd known since we were born. Maybe he felt that he was there that day to comfort *me*, maybe he did not really want to be smoking but did to stop *me* feeling alone.

We did not speak for the entirety of that first cigarette and we did not need to. Even after we had flicked away the cigarette butts and were left only with the racket from the play area we sat silently in the boat in that green field. I had no intention of being the first to speak, it seemed important somehow that he should have the first word. Perhaps he felt the same and if we'd both been more stubborn we would not have spoken at all.

'This is not how I thought it would be,' he said.

Whatever it was that I was expecting, it was not that simple statement so neatly expressing what I had felt upon my return but had lacked the words to say.

‘I thought about this place every day while I was there, about my family, about you lot,’ Martin said. He had been in Afghanistan. I cannot imagine what it must be like to live every moment under threat of death from an unseen enemy, from a roadside bomb or a concealed sniper. ‘When I got back there was something different, something not quite the same about. . . everything.’ I knew what he meant and that feeling had been permeating my days too – part melancholy, part confusion. ‘Though I’m beginning to think that everything is the same but it’s me who’s changed.’

Martin was never book-smart. School did not suit him and he struggled through every exam. Still, I have not met anyone who could finish a crossword as fast as he did, and he was eloquent and could solve even as intransigent a riddle as our hearts.

The day he told us he’d enlisted was a shock. I had got my place at university a couple of weeks before and he had smiled and bought me a pint in the local pub whose landlord knew that not all of us were eighteen but that we weren’t trouble and so let us stay. Everyone had known that I would be going away, it was an inevitability realised, however unconventional education was for us. But when Martin came in and told us his news with a once-a-year smile we responded to it instinctively and congratulated him even though we had grown up with the television pronouncing a constant trickle of names of soldiers consumed by the war on terror, men and women slain by suicide bombers or insurgents or separatists or any of the other forces named like the enemy in the sci-fi films we watched in each other’s sitting rooms throughout our youth. There was a beat before we began celebrating, a pause that hung in the air not quite long enough to betray him but long enough to express our concern as well as our pride.

I wonder what it was like to live through the Somme as a civilian. To hear of half a million dead and no gain to either side, not a decisive pitched battle but a torrent of names each meaning so much to someone somewhere. *The Somme* echoed through our youth, spoken with reverence by teachers born closer to it than we were, who knew those who had survived it as clearly as we knew *them*. The battle happened sometime after Bosworth Field (which was over in an afternoon and had only one casualty of note, Richard of York, who helped us learn the colours of the rainbow) and sometime before we were born, before our parents were born, sometime even before there were mobile phones or the internet. It happened slightly too far in the past to have that much resonance for us, hardened as we were by towers tumbled and trains exploded by men – not in muddy fields with machine guns but with bombs in their shoes, men who wore the same clothes as us, ate in the same restaurants, tried to kill *us*, not those who smiled out of faded black-and-white photographs in their sepia armour.

My grandmother was sixteen when World War II was won. What must that have been like? And yet I never asked her about it and soon it will be gone forever as something experienced by someone, soon it will just be a story.

As we lay in the boat it began to drizzle, no discernible droplets, just a haze of wetness. The laughs and cries died down, but we made no attempt to move.

Martin did not ever tell us why he enlisted and we never asked. It must be too complex a sentiment for a simple sentence. He shifted slightly. 'Why did you want to go to university?' he asked.

The question is an important one, though I have no real answer, even now. I had not ever really thought about it before that day. It had always been my ambition, I suppose, if only because so many

people told me how absurd it was. But deeper than that, I never imagined any future in which I did not go, and perhaps that he asked it highlights the fundamental difference between us: the reason I went off to study and he went off to fight.

Many of those I met at university were less clever than some of my old friends, and yet they had always planned to go to university and their parents simply expected it. Being there meant so little to some people and was simply what they would always have done, as their siblings did, and their cousins – as our siblings and cousins didn't.

'I wanted something more than this,' I said. 'Fun as it was.'

He offered me another cigarette but I declined, my lungs had suffered enough. Martin lit one for himself. 'Same here. School bored me to tears. I couldn't do that again, but I can make myself what I want in the army. Did you make great friends while you were away?'

'I made friends,' I said, 'but none to compare to you lot.' My smile was lost in the rain sheeting down between us, making us appear to each other as shadows in fog. I was lying, of course, but I wanted to perpetuate the idea of the perfection of our childhood, to cling to those roots.

'I made the best friends I've ever had, and probably ever will,' he said quietly. We old boys and girls had such shared experience, so many memories and in-jokes that we remembered down to the exact words. That was comforting, though there were some childhood infelicities it was a relief to slough off. I always found allure in those characters who strode onto a page complete and with no history to justify them, only the glaring presence of what they became at their height. That was freshers' week, I suppose, walking into a room full of people who knew only what they could see and what

I told them. There was something intoxicating about becoming exactly who I chose, though it was glib compared to the years of experience I shared with my childhood friends. Our hometown is not of our choosing, and often not even of our parents', so it is not unsurprising that we have more in common with people whose decisions have led them to the same place as us, to the same barracks or the same university.

'What was it like?' he asked.

I thought of a thousand things to say, but said none of them. They all seemed trite. What could I say to a man who had spent so many months on the frontlines while I moved between lecture halls and labs and bars?

Even at primary school I balked at talking about my day, perhaps because I thought that it only mattered to me, or perhaps *because* the events of my life happen to me only and so they become intensely private. My gut tightened as I searched for something to say, for some words to fill the silence that Martin asked me to fill.

Starting at university was so hard and so unlike how I expected it to be. I felt so unprepared. I had not read enough, or had not read the right things. My new friends all knew so much, cared so much, damned so much and had so many causes to immolate themselves for, so many wrongs to right, so many injustices to battle – all injustices I had been oblivious to. At first, I was a silent listener before their raging words as they argued with wit and passion, I knew only that I didn't know enough to make my own points as cogently. Their opinions were so big and the glamour captivated me.

It was easy to get caught up in their emotive rhetoric, easy to believe that their opinions had been forged in the hearts of those kinds of raging arguments that I had longed for in the years before I finally started. I began to question everything and there was no solid

ground to stand on. Even the Queen who had reigned throughout my life as a constant on stamps and coins was not sacred. Perhaps, after all, she *was* just an absurdity of history, just the ultimate symbol of the entrenchment of social immobility. I will not be King and those not born to it will not be Princesses unless they attend the right university at the right time to quicken the right blue blood.

I still hadn't answered him. I had no answer.

'Did you enjoy it?' he asked.

'It was fun,' I said. 'The people are interesting and yes, I enjoyed myself.'

'Coming back messes with your head. After six months, it's hard to come home,' he said.

'I can imagine,' I said, but I couldn't and still can't.

He was put through so much on behalf of our nation, as so many have been throughout the ages and it was not until I went away that I even considered the war he fought in to be anything other than noble. I understood the irony of *Dulce et Decorum est* intellectually but not emotionally. Though I had known that there were protests, I had seen them as cries for pacifism in the face of Armageddon, screams into the wind to show anguish at the necessity of bloodshed, but never considered them as reasoned complaints about *this* war.

They argued with reason and facts and sometimes attempts to evoke emotion, but I could not accept their words. They talked of colonialism, of a hunt for diminishing resources, of a thousand injustices that they found ever more specialised language for as they clouded complexity with esoteric words. I couldn't argue with them really, and I don't know if I could even now, at least not without resorting to the immediately emotive: to say that he was my friend and that he could die in any of those battles that they damned him for fighting. At the time, I refused to use him as a pawn in those

arguments, preferring to debate the abstraction of armies than the concrete, terrible example of this man I grew up with.

‘Fallen in love?’ he asked.

I smiled a half-smile and laughed a half-laugh. ‘No,’ I said. ‘You?’

‘Not that many women in the army,’ he said with a smile to mirror my own.

‘Was there *the* woman though?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘No.’

While I was away a woman, who for a brief moment I believed was my own *the* woman, criticised a man for making a career in the army, even though I had spoken to her (and her alone) about Martin. I have never been so angry as I was at her dismissiveness towards those who fought and died while she studied a dead language among gleaming spires. She could not comprehend that not being where we were was not a failure, could not see that her path was well trod and illuminated and not everyone’s was.

Fewer and fewer people study Classics anymore. It will be a shame when Latin and Ancient Greek are lost as languages and the *Iliad* can only be read in translation. At the time, I didn’t mind, we have no colonies to be modelled on the Romans anymore. But we are what we preserve, history is more than a single easily assimilated line. It is hard to think of all those languages, cultures, works of art lost. What could have been?

I remember first being taught about Rome at primary school, about the Romans as benevolent conquerors, allowing the conquered peoples to fight in their armies to earn citizenship. They reached Britain of course, back when We were savages and They were civilisation. They came, they saw but they did not conquer. They were sent fleeing by Boudicca, flaming-haired mother of our nation, whose name is spelt as the Romans wrote it because their

words survived and only her deeds did. She died fighting them, but they left, leaving their baths, their roads and a wall separating North from South.

We were told those stories and the Malaysian boy who, some days, was my best friend and whose father always stood in the playground at pick-up time in a smart grey suit and who always had a few words to say to me, and whose accent wasn't quite thick enough to render it incomprehensible, considered himself to be one of Us, and we had no thought of correcting him, and it is only in retrospect that his brown face is incongruous in that sea of white.

The rain started coming down even harder and the shrieking peaked before falling off to almost silence as the families gave up their fight against the weather.

'Have you ever seen a man die?' he asked, and I haven't, either in battle or a bedside vigil and I told him so. 'My best friend,' he said. 'Dead in my arms without any chance for goodbye.'

I had nothing to say to that. There was nothing that I could possibly say. So many have died in so many wars. So many names are carved on distant stones, and so many more are not.

There was a ritual in school – in primary school, at least – of buying the poppy when the tray was brought into the classroom, of wearing it proudly and with faint sadness, of sitting in a week of assemblies where we were taught about the wars and their cost and it all culminated in a minute's silence on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. There was something humbling in that, something great in knowing that across the country we were united to remember. No raging against an immutable past or staining the brightest moments of the present with the shade of that which was terrible, but a quiet acceptance of what was, a brief reflection and then on with the day, the memory lingering in the

back of the mind and us knowing what was and why it was wrong and believing, hopefully correctly, that our generation would not make the mistakes of the past.

I left the silence to string out. He could fill it if he wanted, or have company in his grief if not.

'I'll have to come and visit you at uni,' he said. None of them came to visit me while I was away. It was not that I would have been embarrassed to introduce one group to another. It just didn't happen. It might have been uncomfortable at first, and as jarring for them as it had been for me until I began to talk and to give voice to the thoughts I'd formed in isolation waiting to meet the people I had finally met.

My new friends and I spent the nights arguing with sound and fury which rarely signified anything beyond a fervent interest in the world that we were so sheltered from but would soon have to enter. Still, we filled the silence with the joy of our words and I slowly adjusted to a new understanding without clear lines but with a few tenets to cling to: democracy is better than despotism, civilisation than anarchy, eventual peace than eternal war. Tenets I can talk about abstractly and which I have paid for only with taxes, not with blood or my life.

As we passed from first year to second year there was, I suppose, the realisation that history is complex and though it may suit our purpose to simplify it to lend credence to our cause (class in my case, of course) that does a disservice to all those people who lived out all those lives, each nudging the world this way, or that, until it ended up as it is today.

'Are you going to go back?' I asked.

'I will,' he said. His jaw moved in a circle as he hunted for the words. Something was hanging on his tongue but not quite falling

off. 'Before I came home I would have said it more emphatically and without a shadow of a doubt, but now I'm here things are tougher. Things seemed simpler looking longingly back from the Middle East than they are now I'm home. I...' he trailed off and I understood. On that last night of term with a new group of friends I had desperately wanted to stay forever in the halcyon glow of new people and new ideas and experiences and everything had been much clearer for me too. Now it seems that we clung on to those last few days so desperately because we knew that once we let go and took a break and reflected, we would never recapture what we once had so briefly.

I returned to university, of course, and I enjoyed myself, aware of the past trailing away behind us and sad for that, but only sometimes, like that day in the rotting corpse of the boat in the green field when the disparity between the then and now was highlighted, or on the anniversary of Martin's death. It is easy to get bogged down by history and rendered impotent by the sins of the past, to see only the rot and forget the boat underneath. I was aware of the symbolism at the time, but sometimes a man in a boat is just a friend.

'Shall we get out of the rain?' Martin asked and I nodded. He got up and offered a hand which I took and he pulled me to my feet. We walked through the field, avoiding the puddles and the wettest mud.

'Pub?' I asked.

'Pub,' he said, and we walked side-by-side, knowing that even in the middle of summer there would be a roaring fire to warm and dry us, a cheap pint and good food, and all of those old friends would be there waiting for us, and that although it would not be quite like old times – and probably wouldn't ever be again – that we would be safe, and we would never run out of things to talk about, and that time would fly.

SADE LAUREN WYNTER

Tiger

She looked at her stripes in the mirror that morning, tracing a finger over each delicate line and bump decorating her skin. She smiled as she felt the rough surface of each one. Some were dark pink, and others weren't so dark, but she still appreciated them. She lifted both hands to the sky to stretch. Her stripes stretched with her, and her hip curved with the movement. Why had she not wanted to be a tiger before?

She looked in the mirror this morning with a frown. She ran a rough finger along her dark, pink stripes and wished them gone. She grabbed her hip, hating the striped bulge that formed. Relaxing her grasp revealed a deep red mark against her ugly stripes. She cried out, hating every aspect of them, desperate to feel pretty. She sighed as she hid her stripes behind baggy clothing.

She thought back to when she craved validation for her stripes, a time where she neither loved nor hated them. She asked them 'Do you mind that I'm a tiger?' To which they would respond 'Of course not, everybody has stripes.' Some of them even pretended to care and tried to get to the root of the problem, asking her *why*. She knew they were just entertaining her though. Why use one head when you can get another?

Nothing

She walked along the cracked stone and looked up at the white grey. *Nothing*. Not a single cloud or drop of rain fell. *Silence*. She breathed in the fresh petrol air, though the surroundings were weirdly absent of cars. This was a city unlike home. Cars drove everywhere here, and there were many people, so petrol was more common than damp grass and chirping birds. The sky was a blank piece of paper, clear, wordless and peaceful. The day was bland, like salt as seasoning, or a dry tongue from dehydration. It was autumn, so she decided upon a hot beverage to relieve her tasteless mouth. She was like a sloth walking to get her hot chocolate from the Costa near campus. It was a chilly November afternoon, and she was nonchalant. Nothing excited her today as she walked along the cracks. Usually one of the shops would intrigue her, or a sign in a window would make her wonder whether or not there was a story, but not today. It was just a normal November day.



IV. SCRIPTS



VALERIE GORIAEVA
The Girl In A Picture Frame

FADE IN:

EXT. COURTYARD – A QUAIN T EUROPEAN TOWN – DAY

At such an early hour, the cobblestone courtyard looks peaceful and still. Cracked walls can hardly be seen behind a thick layer of ivy.

In the right-hand corner, there is a bookshop. Right above a large window with a wooden frame, there is a faded mural of a mermaid whose long hair gently sways in the wind. The sun's first light illuminates a golden plaque that reads 'Librairie la Sirène'.

CUT TO:

INT. PICTURE FRAME – BOOKSHOP – DAY

It's pitch black except for a thin streak of golden light that comes through a gap between curtains. TÉA's (20) hand lazily opens the curtain, revealing her delicate silhouette.

CUT TO:

INT. BOOKSHOP – DAY

The bookshop is light, airy, and, despite its petite size, it feels rather spacious. Tall bookshelves are filled with rare leather-bound editions. Numerous curiosities include antique globes, typewriters, bronze statuettes, and even an old printing press.

In the back, there is an inconspicuous door decorated with a painting. Or rather, a portrait of a young woman with a dreamy smile, piercing eyes, and gracefully arched eyebrows, that give her an enchanting, questioning look. This is TÉA. The picture frame with a pearl-grey canvas is her home.

PAULINE (27), the shopkeeper, enters the shop, switches on the light, tosses her thin jacket on a handrail, and drops a needle on a vinyl record.

As a jazz melody starts to play, TÉA reaches out of the frame and takes an ornate band mirror from a table beside her picture frame. Habitually, she beams at her reflection, smooths her shingle bob and pinches her cheeks.

As she puts back the mirror, she makes an unsuccessful attempt to grab the nearest book from the shelf. Oh well, she will try again later.

CUT TO:

INT. BOOKSHOP – DAY (LATER)

There are a few CUSTOMERS in the shop now. Some are browsing books, some are reading in velvet chairs while drinking coffee.

The windows are open, curtains are floating in the warm summer breeze.

TÉA is visibly bored, the sight of chatty customers doesn't entertain her at all. She gives a snobbish smile to those who stop to admire her beauty, but her dreamy gaze quickly shifts to the stacks of books.

The only customers worthy of her attention are the ones who stop to read beside her frame.

Then she leans as far as she can over their shoulder and eagerly catches a few words or paragraphs before they inevitably leave.

JEAN (94), on the other hand, seems to pay close attention to TÉA. This grey-haired, smartly-dressed man is reading in a chair by the window. He cannot help but throw an occasional quizzical glance at that beautiful vain girl in a picture frame, who displays a genuine interest in books.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BOOKSHOP – NIGHT

The sun went down. The shop is empty. Except for JEAN, who is still in the same chair.

PAULINE comes over and gently taps the old man on the shoulder, reminding him that the shop is about to close.

JEAN stands up, but instead of leaving, he walks up to TÉA's frame. She gives him the same condescending smile, but her expression changes as JEAN places his book on the table beside her frame.

JEAN walks away with a slight limp, but TÉA doesn't even notice. Her gaze is glued to the precious book.

When PAULINE locks up and leaves, TÉA leans out to take the book. She hesitates for a moment as if worrying that it might vanish. She grips the book, weighs it in her hands for a moment, carefully strokes its spine.

And then, she starts reading.

MONTAGE:

TÉA's expressions change from child-like wonder, to giddiness, to concern, to relief.

A faint blush appears on her previously pale cheeks.

Images start to appear as if out of a pop-up book and the plot plays out like a paper theatre: a young MAN (18) and a DAMSEL (16) in Elizabethan attire are in a dark rose garden, he is whispering in her ear, a shy smile on her face.

TÉA falls asleep holding a book close to her chest.

END MONTAGE

CUT TO:

INT. BOOKSHOP – DAY

The next day, TÉA looks sleep-deprived but blissful. She beams at customers (her smiles look more genuine now), then yawns and her eyes drift to the ceiling.

When she comes back from her daydreams, she starts frantically scanning the shop, as if searching for someone.

She sees LUIS (24) and JULIEN (23), standing near a bookcase. Their heads are close, they're giggling and cannot keep their hands off each other.

They're holding an open book but both seem to be more interested in each other.

TÉA tilts her head and watches them curiously for a beat.

JEAN enters the shop. TÉA's attention shifts to him.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BOOKSHOP – NIGHT

JEAN takes his jacket from the back of his chair, walks up to TÉA and gives her another book. She eagerly seizes it from his hands, but then remembers her manners and nods at him politely.

PAULINE switches off the light in the shop. TÉA opens the book and rubs her tired eyes.

Suddenly, PAULINE switches on a floor lamp and moves it closer to the portrait. TÉA turns to her in surprise. PAULINE smiles and, after a beat, TÉA smiles back.

CUT TO:

INT. BOOKSHOP – DAY

MADELINE (12) and her tutor, M. GABRIEL (25), sit at the table by the window. They've clearly been there for a while: there are hazardous piles of textbooks and notebooks in front of them, along with empty coffee cups.

MADELINE's head is propped up with her hands, she stares out the window absentmindedly.

M. GABRIEL raises his hands in surrender, gets up from the table and walks up to the check out counter to order another cup of coffee.

TÉA watches as MADELINE sneakily walks up to a globe, spins it, closes her eyes and points to stop it. She then takes an antique atlas from the nearest shelf and carefully flips through its pages.

MADELINE is so absorbed, she nearly jumps when M. GABRIEL comes back and taps her on the shoulder.

The tutor pauses and ponders for a beat.

Then, M. GABRIEL turns his chair around to face the globe. Takes an old spotting scope and magnifying glass from a shelf, and hands the latter to MADELINE and places his fedora hat on her head. Her face lights up with excitement.

TÉA laughs at their game of pretend.

CUT TO IMAGINING:

EXT. SKY – DAY (INTERCUT)

The scene plays out like a paper theatre.

MADELINE and M. GABRIEL, now in Victorian attire, are flying in a hot-air balloon. She looks down through her spotting scope and enthusiastically points at the earth. He pedantically writes notes in his journal.

CUT TO THE PRESENT DAY:

INT. BOOKSHOP – DAY

TÉA wakes from her daydream and looks down at the table next to her frame to find the antique atlas.

MONTAGE:

JEAN brings TÉA a new book every day.

TÉA observes customers with growing interest. She responds emotionally to their interactions.

She anxiously watches a BOY (8) trying to reach a book on the highest shelf, and heaves a sigh of relief when his FATHER (40) puts the boy on his shoulders, helping him reach it.

TÉA smirks and winces at the sight of a teenage COUPLE on their first date. Both of them keep flipping their hair and bouncing their knees nervously.

With a thoughtful expression, TÉA looks at PAULINE who gives a throw blanket to a WOMAN (27). She gratefully nods at her and wraps it around her GRANDMOTHER (85), who fell asleep in an armchair while reading a book.

END MONTAGE

TÉA watches two sisters, CHLOE (5) and EMILIE (7). It's a blissful image: both girls sit in the same large chair near the shelves and read a book together.

EMILIE demonstratively lifts the book to her face, obscuring a beautiful illustration from CHLOE's view. CHLOE attempts to pull it back, EMILIE doesn't even budge. The tug of war ends before it could begin, with EMILIE sharply snatching the book and ripping a page in the process.

CHLOE starts to whimper, which quickly turns into a full-blown sob.

TÉA looks bewildered. After a momentary hesitation, she takes a book from her table and hands it to CHLOE, in an attempt to stop her crying. This backfires, the child's sobs get even louder, CHLOE drops the book — this is not the one she wanted.

Panicked, TÉA takes a freesia flower from a vase on her table and gives it to CHLOE. The crying stops in an instant. CHLOE smells the flower, a radiant smile appears on her face. She walks up to TÉA's frame and reaches out her little hands to bug her.

TÉA timidly leans down and bugs the child. TÉA beams at the new pleasant sensation, but her expression changes to one of alarm. Her dress got caught on the frame, and now there is a long snag on the fabric and a rip on the canvas.

CHLOE notices TÉA's disquiet and hands her back the flower. TÉA sniffs it but remains indifferent — she cannot smell it.

CHLOE rifles through her backpack, pulls out a seashell, gives it to TÉA and gestures to her ear. TÉA holds the seashell up to her ear and listens.

CUT TO IMAGINING:

EXT. SEASIDE — DAY (INTERCUT)

Bright blue waves hit the shore and cover TÉA's sandy feet.

CUT TO THE PRESENT DAY:

INT. BOOKSHOP — DAY

TÉA is wonderstruck. CHLOE and EMILIE'S MOTHER (35), takes CHLOE's hand and leads her and her sister out of the shop.

TÉA is still listening to the seashell when she hears CHLOE knocking on the window. CHLOE waves TÉA goodbye. TÉA leans out of the frame and waves back.

MONTAGE:

CHLOE and other children start bringing TÉA various knickknacks (colourful sea glass, movie ticket stubs, photographs).

Adults join in and place books on TÉA's table.

END OF MONTAGE

CUT TO:

INT. BOOKSHOP – DAY

JEAN is in his usual seat by the window. A few customers are browsing the shelves. TÉA is reading yet another book.

An off-duty OFFICER (22) enters the shop.

TÉA closes her book and begins observing the new customer. She takes notice of his buzz cut, a dog tag hanging from his neck, a winged pin on the right lapel of his jacket.

TÉA continues watching the Officer as he heads for the shelves, pauses, turns around and humbly walks up to JEAN.

TÉA observes their exchange with growing attentiveness.

The Officer heartily shakes JEAN's hand, TÉA overhears how he thanks JEAN for his service.

JEAN motions to a chair inviting the Officer to sit down.

TÉA begins to notice similarities between the two men in their posture and gestures. She sees the same winged pin on JEAN's blazer. She detects scars on his hands and face. She remembers his limp.

Those pieces come together like a puzzle in TÉA's head. A look of horrified realization flashes across her face.

She remembers reading about war, but she could never have imagined that it could take place in reality.

CUT TO IMAGINING:

EXT. TRAIN STATION PLATFORM – 1940 – DAY (INTERCUT)

The platform is crowded with families, friends, wives, who are there to send off soldiers. Young men in uniforms are boarding a train.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. BATTLEFIELD – 1942 – DAY (INTERCUT)

The fury of battle plays out. Smoke drifts. Images of abandoned houses on fire with blown-in windows and collapsed roofs. Muddy landscapes with bomb craters. Soiled faces twisted with pain. Survivors, struggling to carry dying and wounded men.

CUT TO PRESENT DAY:

INT. BOOKSHOP – DAY

TÉA looks as though she has been kicked in the stomach. For the first time, a single tear runs down her cheek, leaving a blurry line on the canvas.

FADE OUT.

INT. BOOKSHOP – DAY

MONTAGE:

It's a rainy spell. Customers enter and exit the bookshop, trying to catch a break from bad weather.

TÉA's curtains are barely open. There's a dull glazed expression on her beautiful face. If it wasn't for apathetic glances that she occasionally throws at the growing pile of books beside her picture frame, she would look like a simple inanimate painting.

Regular customers wave at TÉA but she doesn't react.

END OF MONTAGE

Suddenly, TÉA notices that JEAN's usual seat is empty. For the first time in weeks, her face shows some signs of interest. She scans the shop, searching for him, and then she sees him, sitting in the nearest chair to her frame, with his back towards her.

JEAN doesn't acknowledge her presence, he seems to be reading.

Habitually, TÉA goes to lean over his shoulder but stops herself. Eventually, curiosity gets the better of her and she leans over to see what he's reading.

JEAN is holding an open book, a black-and-white photo of a much younger looking JEAN and his WIFE in place of a bookmark covers most of the page. They look happy and in love. Tall bookcases can be seen behind them.

JEAN is in no hurry to turn the page. He stares tenderly at the photograph for a long beat.

TÉA's expression softens. An understanding smile appears on her face. Another tear rolls down her cheek. A happy one, this time.

FADE OUT.

EXT. COURTYARD – DAY

The following morning. PAULINE opens the bookshop.

CUT TO:

INT. BOOKSHOP – DAY

PAULINE enters the shop. But before she can get on with her routine, she freezes in her tracks.

TÉA's picture frame is still hanging on the door. But TÉA is gone.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BOOKSHOP – DAY

Life goes on, customers slowly flood the shop. A young fair-haired woman is browsing a shelf. Her face isn't visible yet, but it's TÉA in her human form. She picks out a book and heads to the checkout counter. Her walk is so light and graceful, it inevitably turns heads.

TÉA hands PAULINE the book and a banknote. For a moment, PAULINE stares at TÉA, trying to remember if she has seen her before, then. . .

PAULINE (as if speaking to an old friend) It's free of charge.

TÉA Thank you, but I insist.

TÉA turns around to leave, her face is revealed for the first time. She looks different, yet recognisable. Her hair falls in natural waves instead of a structured bob. There's a girlish blush on her previously pale cheeks.

Just as TÉA reaches the door, she stops and looks back at the shop with a subtle grateful smile.

TÉA then steps out into the world.

CUT TO:

EXT. COURTYARD – DAY

It's early autumn. People are going about their day, enjoying the last few weeks of warmth. TÉA walks across the idyllic courtyard until she eventually disappears out of sight.

FADE OUT.

KAMRAN JAWAID

Composure

FADE IN:

1. INT. CHRISTOPHER'S GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE/
CHRISTOPHER'S BEDROOM – MORNING

A lamp casts light upon the desk. A PICTURE FRAME that contains an image of a family can be seen. A HAND enters the frame and picks it up. CHRISTOPHER (17) looks at it. His t-shirt is grey and casual. His hair is disorderly. As he looks at the picture frame, we see that his face is sentimental, and a lonely tear can almost be seen.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

EXT. FUNERAL – DAY

The cloudy sky hangs over the many attendants at a funeral. CHRISTOPHER stands next to his younger brother DANIEL (15). They are dressed in black and white suits. They watch two coffins being lowered carefully into the ground. Multiple tears silently roll down their cheeks.

END FLASHBACK.

INT. CHRISTOPHER'S GRANDMOTHER'S ROOM/
CHRISTOPHER'S BEDROOM
– MORNING

CHRISTOPHER places the PICTURE FRAME back down on the desk. The lamp creates an area of warm light in the mostly dim room. The picture frame, a pile

of policing documents, a student lanyard and a pencil case can be seen. He leaves the room.

2. EXT. COLLEGE — MORNING

An overcast sky hangs over the College. Students and staff are entering the building. A group of students converse noisily and the harsh and disrupting sound of cars arriving can be heard.

INT. COLLEGE / LIBRARY — MORNING

CHRISTOPHER, wearing a slate t-shirt, droops over the dark table as he completes his homework. Though he seems isolated, he displays friendliness. He fidgets. The overcast British day brings a gloom and creates a shadow over him. The movement and discourse of other students and the scratching of pen on paper is heard. Another student is sitting at a table not far from CHRISTOPHER. His arms are crossed against his chest in a thinking gesture. His eyes are wide and locked on CHRISTOPHER. He wears a dark green hoodie with the hood up. It is JAMES. He walks towards CHRISTOPHER. CHRISTOPHER glances up and James gives him a cold smile.

JAMES (*coldly*) I heard you won the football match and got the highest grade in the class in our last exam.

CHRISTOPHER's eyes widen and he fidgets uneasily in the chair. He is cautious.

CHRISTOPHER (*uncomfortably*) Yeah

CHRISTOPHER continues to complete his homework while James is quiet with his arms and legs crossed. James's eyes are fixed on CHRISTOPHER. There is a silence.

JAMES (*insincerely*) I am happy for you.

CHRISTOPHER (*kindly*) Thanks, James. You should've joined the football team. You were quite good last year.

JAMES (*quickly*) But not as good as you, though?

The bell rings. The surrounding students begin to leave. CHRISTOPHER puts his belongings in his backpack and stands.

CHRISTOPHER I think we're in the IT room tomorrow. Bye.

CHRISTOPHER walks to the exit of the library. James turns and he glares enviously at him.

FADE TO BLACK

3. EXT. COLLEGE — AFTERNOON

A dismal, rainy sky hangs over the building. The disturbing sound of cars passing by and a group of rebellious teenage boys can be heard joking with each other as they walk confidently along the pathway.

INT. COLLEGE/ LIBRARY — AFTERNOON

CHRISTOPHER sits alone in the dull library completing another homework assignment. The leaden weather, the brown tables and bookshelves create a dark and foreboding atmosphere. The door opens. James has entered. CHRISTOPHER is trying to remain unaware of James's presence. One of his knees and legs tremble as he writes. James's hard footsteps can be heard as he tramps over to CHRISTOPHER.

JAMES (*aggressively*) You think you're so amazing, don't you?

CHRISTOPHER stands up from the chair in a swift and aggressive manner but stops himself before becoming too close to James. They stand opposite each other. CHRISTOPHER's face is tense.

CHRISTOPHER (*passionately*) No, I don't. Why do you think that?

James's eyebrows raise and his mouth opens. He is scared. He is being confronted.

JAMES (*stuttering*) You will never amount to anything! I'm better than you!

CHRISTOPHER takes a quick deep breath, turns away and begins to pick up his belongings. James steps closer to him.

JAMES I see the way you walk around... so proud of yourself. You should just go home to your stupid brother!

CHRISTOPHER's face is red, and his eyes are alert. He swings around and pushes James backwards and he falls. CHRISTOPHER stands there in a raging state. His heart beats rapidly. The other students gasp. James groans while lying on the ground. CHRISTOPHER rushes out of the library.

FADE TO BLACK

4. INT. CHRISTOPHER'S GRANDMOTHER'S HOME /
KITCHEN — AFTERNOON

CHRISTOPHER stands alone in the grey kitchen. His eyes are gazing at the floor. He is ruminating. The sound of the kettle whistling is heard. The sound of a door opening is heard. CHRISTOPHER's brother comes dashing in. He is wearing a school uniform. His shirt is wrinkled, and his tie is loose. CHRISTOPHER's mouth widens with fright. He rushes forward to DANIEL, examines DANIEL's face and sees that it is bruised.

The whistling kettle is a furious sound.

CHRISTOPHER (*shocked*) How did this happen, Daniel?

DANIEL *groans and is short of breath.*

DANIEL Some guy just punched me!

The kettle continues to boil.

CHRISTOPHER (*irate*) What did he look like?

DANIEL (*scared*) He had dark hair and he was wearing a green hoodie!

The water in the kettle has boiled, and the whistling has stopped.

CHRISTOPHER James...

5. INT. CHRISTOPHER'S GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE/
CHRISTOPHER'S BEDROOM — EVENING

The lamp in the room illuminates the end of CHRISTOPHER'S bed while he sits in the gloom. The violent rain falls against the window. His arms are crossed around his knees. His head hangs low and his shoulders are rounded as if he is being weighed down. His face is solemn and is almost hidden by his grey hood. He is ruminating.

CHRISTOPHER (*angrily*) James needs to get what he deserves! He attacked Daniel!

CHRISTOPHER fiercely stands up from his bed with his hands clenched with exasperation. A moment later, he sighs intensely, sits down and puts his hand on his head.

CHRISTOPHER (*coolly*) I shouldn't have pushed him. My family are probably ashamed of me.

A moment later, CHRISTOPHER'S GRANDMOTHER enters. The light from the hallway brings a glow in the gloom. Her face is wrinkled with age and wisdom.

Her hair contains strands of white and grey. Her clothing is vibrant. She walks calmly and sits on the bed next to CHRISTOPHER. CHRISTOPHER breaths deeply.

GRANDMOTHER (*softly*) Daniel is alright now – though his face is still a bit sore.

CHRISTOPHER (*annoyed and upset*) Why did I push James? I should have known that he would've done something like this! It's all my fault.

CHRISTOPHER's Grandmother's continues to listen him. Her eyes are full of empathy.

CHRISTOPHER (*angrily*) Maybe I should go teach James a lesson!

GRANDMOTHER (*calmly*) I understand that you're angry, Christopher. You didn't know what the consequences of your actions would be. None of us do in the moment, but later regret and guilt fills the mind. I'm not ashamed of you.

There is a pause.

GRANDMOTHER Now Christopher, are you just going to sit here and feel sorry for yourself? There are no bad situations, there are only lessons.

CHRISTOPHER's GRANDMOTHER smiles and leaves the room.

CHRISTOPHER looks up and moves towards the end of his bed. The lamp shines light on the display of police posters and family pictures on the wall. His face and body begin to ease as he gazes at the display in recognition. His fists unclench and his breath slows down.

CHRISTOPHER If I were to get my revenge, would I be just as bad as James? Being a policer officer requires confidence and composure.

If I don't make a change to myself now, then I'll remain the same in the future. If I were to fight James, what would Daniel think of me? Daniel needs a role model. I need to be in control of my emotions!

He smiles with determination and hope.

6. INT. COLLEGE / LIBRARY – DAY

CHRISTOPHER enters the library calmly. His jacket is bright blue which exudes an atmosphere of tranquillity. He walks over to one of the tables. The chatter of the other students can be heard. The blue, yet cloudy, sky brings a freshness within. James can be seen sitting at a table. His arms and legs are crossed as tightly as ever, and his face is smug. At the sight of James, CHRISTOPHER's hands begin to clench, and his eyebrows begin to furrow. He stops for a moment. He takes a long deep breath. A moment later, the tension in his fists and his body begins to alleviate. He walks over to James. James's eyes fixate on CHRISTOPHER.

CHRISTOPHER (warmly) I forgive you, James. You don't have to accept it.

James smirks with malice.

JAMES (unapologetically) Your brother deserved it! You know I'm playing in the next football match and I can't wait to see you fail!

There is a pause.

CHRISTOPHER (softly and sincerely) I saw that you came first in that race for charity. That's quite impressive. I wouldn't even attempt to do something like that.

James's smirk disappears and his eyes widen. He is taken aback. He seems to take the compliment. He looks down in an almost panicky manner. He is in a state of

introspection. CHRISTOPHER composedly walks to the other table and sits down. He takes out his necessary books and stationery. He sits up straight. The hopeful light from the window gleams through.

FADE TO BLACK

7. EXT. STREET OUTSIDE CHRISTOPHER'S
GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE — EVENING

All is serene in the dark street. The pure moon shines down on the darkness below.

*INT. CHRISTOPHER'S GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE/
CHRISTOPHER'S BEDROOM*

— EVENING

CHRISTOPHER stands next to his desk with his shoulders pushed back. He wears a white t-shirt. He picks up the PICTURE FRAME and smiles with acceptance. The illumination that the white moon exudes enters the room. The light bulb from the roof creates a warmth within.

8. INT. CHRISTOPHER'S GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE/
GARDEN — EVENING

CHRISTOPHER, dressed in a white hoodie, walks out of the back door. He stands tall and straight as he gazes up at the slightly cloudy sky. The tranquil moon glimmers down onto CHRISTOPHER'S face.

CUT TO BLACK

V. NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

J. SHARON ADEKOYA is a pharmacy student with no formal experience in writing. She doesn't write much and tends to hide away what she has written. She hopes her piece in this publication will be the motivation to share her musings more with the world. She loves art in different forms, engages in singing and is interested in photography. When she is not swamped with schoolwork, she is most likely listening to music, reading, cooking or sleeping. One of her desires is to take a creative writing course sometime in the future.

SINEA ALVIS began writing poetry as a way to express her emotions. This was suggested by her teacher Mrs Reid, who she had great respect for. Sinea enjoys writing about subjects that affect her or those around her whether that be personal or societal issues. Race and poverty are among her favourite subjects to speak on. Being of mixed heritage and coming from a working-class family, Sinea explores both its advantages and disadvantages as well as allows her to articulate her concerns and experiences of her reality.

ZOË BARRY is a passionate writer whose poetry comes from the heart. She uses experiences in her life as inspiration for her creations,

writing through whimsical eyeglasses. In the past two years, she has found a way to use her poetry as an outlet, hence why her most recent poems combine the essence of trauma with fanciful, symbolic imagery. When reading her poetry, Zoë hopes that her readers will temporarily leave reality and step into a more magical one. One where staircases appear out of thin air, and extraordinary possibilities are just a step away.

ROBERT BOBEICA moved to London with his family in 2015 at the age of 12, in pursuit of a more comfortable life. He became quickly enamoured by self-expression through performing arts, having joined his school's dance company and frequenting the theatre club. Art is something that is very dear to him, and he recently started extending his interest in art into the written form – writing poems, short stories, and songs. He is currently a computer science student, but he can't imagine a future where his career is not in the world of art.

J. ALEXANDER BURGIN is a travel-sized Swiss-American in his first year of creative writing at the University of Greenwich. Chronic boredom, an affliction only relieved by always being up to something, leaves him with less time to read than he'd like. You can often find him practicing choir songs while cooking, or mentally outlining a stage play for the Performing Arts Society on his way to uni. His contributions to the Anthology are among his first attempts at poetry after the lovely Cherry Smyth has introduced him and his classmates to the form.

SARA LUJE CASA was born in Ecuador, but she moved to Spain when she was a child. She lived there with her family until she was

19, when she realised she needed to leave for a while. She chose London as her destination with the hope of improving her English skills. Finally, she decided to stay, and she applied for a degree at the University of Greenwich. Now, she is studying while she is trying to find herself. She is passionate about self-improvement, spirituality, psychology and movement, she loves yoga and nature.

MELEK CELLA is a mature student born in Cyprus. She's spent a number of years living in England. She's in her final year studying BA Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. In 2008, she completed a Foundation course in Professional Writing at North Kent College, but took an extended break, due to medical reasons. She's a published poet and enjoys writing non-fiction, particularly poetry, which allows her imagination to run riot unfettered by physical limitations. During her final year she wants to develop her writing skills in all genres and her ambition is to produce a bestselling novel.

ZARIN CHOUDHURY was born in London. She is currently enrolled at Greenwich University as a third-year student, studying English Literature. She aims to get her degree and pursue writing as a career, aspiring to be a successful author. Writing has always been significant and consistent in Zarin's life. She thinks of it as imprinting art that's expressed in the form of well-written thoughts. She believes it's not only a way to escape or create a fantasy world, it's a way of expressing individuality, fabricating something special with imagination and prominent past experiences.

RUBY DUONG is currently studying the Executive Master of Business Administration at the University of Greenwich. Having

previously studied her undergraduate degree at the university five years ago she has contributed to previous anthologies during her studies. As an English Literature graduate, she has always had a passion for writing romantic novels and poetry which allows her to demonstrate her creative flair. She is now a full-time member of staff and studying her master's as well as teaching at the University of Greenwich.

SIHAM DUNCAN has graduated with a first-class bachelors, as well as achieved a distinction in her master's degree. She came to England when she was almost eight years old, had never been to school and could not speak English or write her own name. She soon developed a deep passion for literature and spent most of her time reading and writing, aspiring to be an author someday. However, she could never gather the confidence to submit her work, until now. Siham is inspired by a range of genres and authors, particularly the works of poets and activists: Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou.

LAURA EVANS comes from the town of Didcot, Oxfordshire. She is currently in her second year studying Creative Writing and English Literature at Greenwich. This is her second piece of published work. When not reading her substantial book collection, which she has no room for, but continues to add to, she can be found at the theatre or cinema. In the future, she would love to write for the film and theatre industries, and hopefully see her work come to life.

SAM GILBERT took ten years to finally finish his degree. In the upcoming utopian anarchy, he would direct his stage plays, pen scripts, publish little poetry books and never work a proper job again. He will more than likely go into teaching. As of late, he broods



and legises from a lair in Essex, with a beautiful percussionist and a hilarious black kitten. He doesn't like wearing a mask, unless it's a cool one that doesn't fog up his glasses.

LUCAS GOMES is a 21-year-old born and raised in Portugal by Brazilian parents. He moved to London to do an undergraduate degree in Computer Science. He enjoys reading articles and occasionally books about psychology, programming, and other subjects that might catch his attention. His favourite instrument is the bass guitar. He enjoys going to the cinema and never refuses a chance to eat a good hamburger.



VALERIE GORIAEVA is a Film and Television Production student. She was born and raised in Russia and now lives in London, where she hopes to pursue a career as a writer-director. Valerie enjoys writing stories inspired by folklore and fairy tales, her strengths lie in creating diverse characters and building convincing story worlds. Valerie's favourite genres are magical realism and historical fiction. When she is not writing and making short films, she can be found performing in theatrical productions or designing historical costumes.



TAHLIA GREEN has loved to express her thoughts and feelings through written expression ever since she was a child. Poems have always had a special place in her heart, in both reading and writing them. Through studying sociology and criminology at the University of Greenwich, she has been able to learn about injustice in society, leading her to write poems regarding her opinions on the world she lives in. Her poems are inspired by the writing styles of Margaret Atwood and Chidera Eggerue, as well as the news and



films. Though she aims to become a detective after university, Tahlia will always continue writing thought-provoking, emotive poems.

GEORGIA GRIFFIN is a second-year Creative Writing and English Literature student. She has always loved literature and discovered her passion for studying Shakespeare in her later years at Primary School. On a whim, Georgia decided to submit her work to the Greenwich anthology (not thinking at the time she'd ever get picked!) She initially set a goal to publish something before her 24th birthday and smashed that record four years early. Instead, she now aims to spend the next four years trying to avoid procrastination and hopefully achieve her dream of finishing her first novel.

BEATA GRISKEVIC was born in Lithuania, which once upon a time, was a kingdom from the Baltic up to the Black Sea. Her friends call her a positive spirit with sparkling blue eyes. She is a curious girl and wants to know more about the world. That is why she loves travelling and learning new languages and cultures. She speaks four languages fluently. She has an international set of minds and believes in people and that humans create powerful projects and countries. That is why she has joined the University of Greenwich for the LLM International and Commercial Law.

BETHANY HOWELL is currently a masters student studying LLM International and Commercial Law at the University of Greenwich. She undertook her undergraduate law degree from 2017 – 2020. She will be going to Bar School in September 2022 to eventually become a multi-disciplinary barrister. She is an advocate for mental health and is passionate about supporting others through their battles. Poetry was an avenue which helped Bethany to come to

terms with her diagnoses of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

OLAITAN HUMBLE is a writer, editor at Lumiere Review and reader at Bandit Fiction. Winner of the 2020 EW Poetry Prize's People Choice Award and Finalist for NND Poetry Prize and Loft Books Poetry Prize, he has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net Award. His writing appears in *FIYAH*, *HOAX*, *HOBART*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Chiron Review*, *Superstition Review*, and *Ethel Zine*, among others.

AIMAN ISLAM was born in Kishoreganj (Bangladesh) and brought up in Treviso (Italy). Her passion for writing began at the age of 10, when she wrote her first poem about snow. Influenced by writers like Rumi and Dante, Islam pushes the boundaries between realism and surrealism with her own anthology – *Depression and Obsession* – published at the age of 18. Islam has read texts ranging from the novelist Haruki Murakami to philosophical writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche. A book she resonates with is 'The Alchemist' by Paulo Coelho. Currently in her 2nd year at the University of Greenwich, Islam is studying Advertising and Digital Marketing where she continues to pursue her passion.

JEAN KAWARA is a 4th year pharmacy student at Medway School of Pharmacy. She realised she loved writing when she read out loud her analysis of the complicated relationship between Pip and Joe Gargery from the book *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens which she studied in Literature. She loves writing stories about Zimbabwean people, there are so many untold stories both joyful and painful. Her wonderful relationship with Simba her husband

serves as the backdrop to her work. She hopes to get published in the future as she hopes write about her beautiful relationship with her late mother as part of her work. She also writes Christian poetry which she believes is the window to her soul.

BEATRIX KONYVES is a writer and youth worker, currently in her final year of studying BA English Literature with Creative Writing. Her prose is often dark and direct. She runs her B-Side Blog on coffee and books, posting short daily updates about her life and occasionally sharing long opinion articles about her experiences. This is her first publishing opportunity and she is currently working on her first novel, a YA dystopia. She is also the co-founder of DEIS UK, a not-for-profit organisation engaging young people and encouraging them to make the changes they want to see in the world.

KAMRAN JAWAID is from the East of England and is currently studying Psychology at the University of Greenwich. Kamran hopes to pursue a career in this field. Kamran studied English Literature, Film Studies and BTEC Level 3 Information Technology for his A-Levels. He is competent at reading Arabic and speaking Punjabi. Furthermore, his hobbies involve engaging in stunt scooter-riding (which he has been doing for many years) and reading novels. He is also interested in films and enjoys writing screenplays. Specifically, he is interested in how films depict human behaviour and how certain characters develop as the narrative progresses.

KLAUS LISTER is a third year Creative Writing student, specialising in novel writing. He loves creating characters, often queer and flawed, and putting them in traumatic or romantic situations – there's rarely an in-between. He is going to publish his first novel,

Godforsaken, a low-fantasy story of a queer punk band, as soon as he can, and has many other novels in the works: *Because Of You I Might Think Twice*, a story of two queer American high-school students coming to terms with their realities; *Timeless*, a medieval tale of two royal messenger boys falling in love; and an untitled piece about a struggling ex-convict rock band who lost their best friend and vocalist to a tragic accident.

CONNOR LONG-JOHNSON, currently writing his thesis on the fiction of Stephen King at the University of Greenwich in London, England, enjoys writing short stories in the gothic, fantasy and science-fiction genres. He has had various works published, three short pieces of fiction with HorrorTree's *Trembling With Fear*, another in Breaking Rules Publishing's horror anthology *The Hollow* and three with Science-Fiction website 365tomorrows.

ADRIENN-KRISZTINA LORINCZI is a second year creative writing student at the University of Greenwich. She explores topics from personal trauma to global issues through writing poetry. Her education chains her to England, whereas her spiritual self, her devotion to her hobbies and interests come from all parts of the world. She was born and raised in Targu Mures, a small town in Romania. Adrienn is family-centred and she would go to great lengths for her friends. She dreams of building up a career, through the art of writing, with the purpose of helping to change lives for the better.

HARRY LORRAINE is an aspiring author, poet, and academic studying psychology at the University of Greenwich. He avidly climbs mountains and immerses in cold water to develop a greater sense of connection to nature. Throughout the course of Harry's

life, he would contemplate on the nature of existence and what it means to feel truly alive, reading books from all genres to explore this. His quest for curiosity stems back to when he was a child and would look up at the universe every waking night.

LUCY MADDIX is a mother, a creative writing student, and an aspiring writer. Her interests are travelling, experiencing different cultures, and reading stories and poems to her child. Currently, she is exploring the continent of Africa, researching the connections between Earth's climate crisis, social issues, injustice, and Mother Nature's beauty.

MAIBO is an author come quote maker from Kerala, India. She is a passionate and versatile writer who is a researcher by profession. If someone asks her, why she is behind writing quotes, is it because of the current trend? For that, her answer is, she loves writing. Apart from writing, she loves adventurous sports, trekking, travelling and to explore nature. She loves to write quotes which are related to daily life.

DARREN RICHARD MARSH is currently studying Psychology, BSc Hons at the University of Greenwich and works alongside the University as an Ambassador and is the Student Representative for his year. His background involves ICT, media and engineering, alongside 6+ years within the public sector. He is a BTEC, Diploma and Duke of Edinburgh Awarded individual. Living in Southeast London and is the second oldest of four, with an older sister (Shelley) and two younger brothers (Jason and Casey). Alongside his studies and work life, he finds time to do a bit of soldering and enjoys spending time with friends and family.

LYDIA MARSHALL is a third year BA Creative Writing student at the University of Greenwich. Publishing is the perfect course for her, as she's always found it easier to express herself through her writing. Ever since she can remember, Lydia has been passionate about creative writing, from writing poetry, to journaling, song-writing and blogging. In 2018, she self-published her book *Purpose*, which was a great achievement for her. Studying on the publishing module has inspired her to pursue a career in Publishing. Lydia's aim is to achieve greatness and she is making the most of all the opportunities that she's presented with.

AISHA MCNAMARA is an 18-year-old Media and Communications student. She is studying the subject because it relates to her future ambitions of becoming a music journalist or a radio presenter. In her spare time, she likes to collect CDs, review music releases, and write song lyrics under the guise of her project which, she is currently working on focusing on a fictional band in the 1990s: Takers.

LAURA MILES is in her final year of her English Literature with Creative Writing degree at the University of Greenwich, and this is her first time being published. Originally from a small town in Surrey, Laura has thrived in London and finds inspiration around every corner. She has always been passionate about reading and writing and is greatly inspired by Victorian Gothic literature. Laura works and volunteers in libraries in Surrey and Croydon and aims to complete a Master's degree in Information and Library Studies. Laura hopes to have a successful career working in libraries and archives, as well as publishing more work in prose and poetry.

SHENESE MOODLIAR is a 23-year-old third year student, studying a BA Creative Writing and English Literature degree. She has definitely found herself in her creative work; that being poetry.

PETRA PALKOVACSOVA studies Creative Writing and English Literature at the University of Greenwich. She has been living in London for two years, and she is originally from a small rural village in Slovakia. Her interests in art range from abstract painting to theatre direction. She is also interested in creative writing, focusing on poetry and drama. She is a passionate reader of both fiction and non-fiction, reading a book a day on average. She was shortlisted for the Street Cake experimental writing prize in short fiction in 2021 with her piece *I Remember*.

MARIANA SANTOS PINHO is a 23-year-old proud Portuguese student who is currently studying her final year of BA Creative Writing at the University of Greenwich. She came to London to pursue her dream of writing. Most of her poetry reflects controversial subjects that she wants people to identify with and understand, whilst her prose mainly explores fictional realms. She hopes to be creative and original, but most importantly, she aims to reach out and connect with people. This is her third published work.

JACCO POT was born on the 19th of August 1994, a musician and songwriter from the Netherlands, currently studying international event Management at the University of Greenwich. Known for playing music and organising events in his hometown Zwolle, he has a great love for poetry and the written word.



RICH PRYCE-WILLIAMS: Eventually Peter Pan had to grow up; because either the party ended, or it was going to be the end of him. He redirected his life to a bold new adventure, filled with meaning and hope. And while he still got to see the wonder, it just felt more real now that he wasn't running away anymore. Forever the proud parent, finally appreciating the love of an honest man, reconnecting with the neglected inner nerd and embracing the ever the hopeless romantic. When he finally opened his eyes to beards, butts and anything botanical he truly became living proof that life really does begin at 40.

JESSIE ROBINSON is a 21-year-old poet who has started their undergraduate degree in Psychology with Counselling at the University of Greenwich. Jessie writes creative yet personal poems and during their teenage years was fortunate enough to publish a poem under the title of *My Internal Fight*. Jessie has always been a firm believer that through the expression of poetry the mind can become clearer. Jessie wrote the poem featured in this anthology to portray their emotions on the journey to find themselves after their long-term relationship ended during the first Coronavirus national lockdown.

HOLLY ROFF is a third-year student studying English Literature with Creative Writing. She began to read avidly at the age of five, and began writing stories a few years later; her strong interest in reading and writing has only grown since. She loves to edit her friends' work and would like to become a fictional book editor as well as hopefully publishing her own novel one day.

DESANTILA QERIMAJ RRANXA was born in Shkoder Albania, on 21.01.1980. She studied music and the cello for 12 years music



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 left aside 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. Lastly, in 2019 she published her first book of poetry in Albanian language. She has lived in London since 2011.

STEPHEN SALEH successfully published his graphic novel, *Dark Lines of London*, in 2019, and this inspired him to end his 35 years of corporate life in IT and property development and sign up with the University of Greenwich as an extra-mature student where he is now in the third year of his Creative Writing BA. As he approaches the end of his degree, the horror of returning to the real world has him poring over the Creative Writing Masters page with great interest.

MUHUMMAD KHURRAM SALIM, born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in the summer of 1967, is a poet and writer who loves to express himself in words and images, and share his work with others. He won a Shankar's Children's International Competition (1983) medal, for a short-story. Between 1977 and 1985 he published stories and poems in The Bangladesh Observer newspaper. A prolific poet, he has written many poems, and has published a number of them, mostly in Britain. He has written novels and plays too. Muhammad takes a keen interest in the Arts, and writes regularly, sharing his work, much of it online.



JULIE SANFORD is a second-year mature student of English Language and Literature, returning to education after raising her six children. She describes her life as a rotation of washing and cooking with the occasional essay thrown in. As an avid reader, she has devoured most forms of literature however she has only recently started to admire poetry. Her poetry awakening occurred this year. Leaves with written after a dog walk in a secluded park. The comfort of her Italian mastiffs' size allowed her the freedom to walk at night. However, the ingrained fear is still present.

JUSTIN SOLLY was originally living in Iceland before coming back to his hometown Southend, due to the pandemic. He has been working as a manager in hospitality for nearly ten years, on returning to his seaside town and during the subsequent lock down, he rediscovered his passion for writing and enrolled at Greenwich University, where he studies creative writing and English literature. Justin still works part time as a manager of a bar and has recently finished the first draft of his novel: A prophecy of immortals. He enjoys drinking beer and writing poetry and enjoying life to the full.

AMBER SPRINGER is a young woman with a very active imagination. She originally didn't want to be a writer, she wanted to be a fashion designer, if you can believe it. Thanks to a certain secondary school friend of hers, she became enthralled by the writing world. Ever since then, Amber has turned into a bit of a teen fiction nerd. While her main focus is prose writing, she does dabble in other types of writing such as poetry and short story writing to name a couple. Amber thoroughly enjoys writing and hopes it will lead her to big things.





DANIA STEPHENSON is a black female writer from London. The 19-year-old has a creative streak for many things such as art, photography and poetry, inspired by her daily life, culture and interests. She currently studies Landscape Architecture and largely enjoys being around nature or anything that she feels connected to in a spiritual sense.

MARJANA SULTANA is a first-year student, who is studying English Literature. For her, the art of writing is a form of healing and letting go of certain emotions. Her poems are the embodiment of distressing themes such as depression, anxiety, insecurity and loss. However, the meaning behind them brings the light to love, learning about self-love and self-reflection. She takes inspiration from art, nature and music – which allows her to express her imagination with creativity and emotions. She aspires to become a world-renowned poet and novelist, in hope that someday others can be inspired by her works and the message behind them.



ANAIS TINEZ travelled a long way from Belgium to study at the University of Greenwich for a Bachelor in Psychology. She has no idea of what she wants to do later on, but she wants to be aware of the overwhelming issues around the world. And that is through documentary videos. She was adopted from China with her twin sister. She is 20 years old and she wishes she could sleep her whole life and dream.

BURÇAK TURAN was born and raised in Izmir, in the western part of Turkey. She moved to the UK for her postgraduate studies. She is a 25-year-old Civil Engineer and currently studying Sustainable Building Design and Engineering MSc. at the University

of Greenwich. She is passionate about playing piano, wind surfing, watching FI races, oil painting and writing essays as well as poetry. She always seeks beauty in nature, buildings and people, also loves taking photographs of these unique beauties and moments. She thinks life is all about looking for and finding happiness; a peaceful/balanced part in ourselves (in our minds and souls).

OGECHUKWU OBIKEH UDEAGHA can usually be found writing. She pens down as the spirit of the bamboo forest directs. She is a 2nd year student of Mental Health Nursing. One of her wishes growing up, was to write a novel and she's accomplished it with her compelling unpublished novel, *Echezona*. Her writings have appeared in Kalahari Magazine and Fides newspaper. When not writing, Ogechukwu enjoys long walks, she also spends time in the kitchen making Nigerian soups with assorted meat. She lives in London with her husband and children.

ANDREA ULIBARRENA is a 20-year-old second year Creative Writing student at the University of Greenwich who has been passionate about telling stories since she figured out how to hold a pencil. Her favourite genres to write in are fantasy and speculative fiction, especially with very flawed queer women as protagonists, and she loves dark-but-hopeful stories that explore the intricacies of human relationships, emotions, and mental health. During the 2020 lockdown she accomplished her goal of self-publishing a novella: a fairytale-inspired coming-of-age story that is set in a fantasy world and centres around a lesbian romance, titled *One Wish*. She is passionate about the need for representation in fiction and loves to write characters who defy stereotypes. She also loves cats and chocolate and coffee shops and has a strange obsession with plaid shirts.

LOUISE USHER is a life writer from Kent, UK where she lives with her twins and Shihtzu. She usually travels widely to continue her writing while drawing inspiration from people-watching on sandy shores. Her current work in progress is her own painful auto ethnography of IVF and subsequent single parent heartbreak. Following the best-seller status of *Covid 19 – How it made us feel*, Louise is authoring a PhD on the same subject (with hermeneutic phenomenology as the methodology) as well as editing book two, 'Deja-Vu: from behind the mask' which is to be published early 2022.

MARIA-CRISTINA VASILE is a Psychology student at the University of Greenwich. As part of completing this programme, she is conducting a research project to investigate how dreams influence learning, personal development and spiritual growth. Maria is also a healer with more than three years of experience in intuitive anatomy, heart healing, theta waves, hypnosis, and holistic therapy. She is the organiser of the heart healing course which brings people from all over the world together to discover and understand themselves, using meditation, Tibetan exercises, and awareness to bring transformation and spiritual awakening. During the weekend, she loves going for walks in nature and writing poetry.

SZANDRA VETESI is currently a second year BSc Hons Sociology and Criminology student with a burning passion for creative writing. She believes that stories are not merely great entertainment tools to escape the often fast paced lives we live. Stories of all sorts are to be told to bring together past and the future to make the present more valuable. Szandra feels that choosing Sociology and Criminology has enhanced her ability of critical thinking and helped her expand her views about social issues which she can apply in her writing.

She is working hard to create stories to which many people can relate, and hopefully publish her novels she is currently working on in her free time.

S M WHITMAN has been a researcher, engineer, civil servant, start-up executive and now teacher. However, wherever he has worked and whatever he has been doing, he has brought a book or a notepad to indulge his passion for reading and writing.

SADE LAUREN WYNTER is a second-year Creative Writing student with a passion for writing prose stories. When she was little, she would immerse herself in the fictional world of teenage characters in books. The characters within these books were so relatable to her, that they would inspire her to write her own little stories in her notebook- she still wants to burn these stories, but realises that these stories were a crucial part of her journey in becoming a better writer. Recently, instances in her own life inspire her, turning the embarrassing aspects of her life into stories.

ISMAIL ZAMAN is studying English Literature and is currently in his first year. He enjoys writing as it provides a cathartic release to many thoughts and feelings. Being able to translate emotions into different forms of texts, whether it be poetry or prose, is something that resonates strongly with him. The idea of writing creatively also allows opportunities to develop one's voice of expression. He interprets those emotions enveloped within creative writing as not only a form of art that can be recognised by others, but can also serve as a reminder to him that you always must advance in life.













