



MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY VII

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A Collection of New Writing

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Foreword by Beth Underdown, 2019.

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Beth Underdown	iv
David Adamson – Poetry and Prose	2
Katherine Bosworth – Prose	8
Ali Buchan – Prose	12
Suzi Clark – Poetry and Prose	18
Paddy Dobson – Prose	24
Toby Hall – Prose	30
Mary Hastilow – Poetry	34
Jordan Heyward – Poetry	40
Tara Hussain – Prose	44
Jessie Jeffrey – Prose	50
Shirley-Anne Kennedy – Poetry and Prose	54
Thomas D. Lee – Prose	60
Pippin Major – Prose	66
Matthew McGrogan – Prose	70
Alex Peilober-Richardson – Prose	74
Susannah Rae – Poetry and Prose	78
Kristi Rose – Prose	84
Matt Smith – Prose	88
Marina Vassilopoulos – Prose	92
Christine Walker – Prose	96
Arabella Watkiss – Poetry	100
Ryan Whittaker – Prose	104
Adam Wolstenholme – Prose	110
Gail Wright – Prose	114
Credentials and Thanks	118

FOREWORD by Beth Underdown

I am utterly unable to be objective about this book, because it worked for me.

The Manchester Anthology is printed each year to show the best work of students on The University of Manchester's creative writing masters course. Some time ago, a chapter of my writing appeared in this anthology. My agent picked up a copy, and the same chapter — hair combed and shirt tucked in, altered but recognisable — was published by Penguin in my debut novel. That novel did well enough to get me: the job I have now; a heavy glass trophy; fifteen minutes' microphone time opposite Jenni Murray on *Woman's Hour*; and, perhaps most thrillingly, a seat on a sofa one afternoon rather close to Richard Madeley.

What I'm saying is that, if I have fame and fortune — ok, alright then — if my writing has made it out into the world — then it's down to the book in your hands.

Between these pages reside twenty-four separate hopes of this kind of discovery. Of someone who'll read a paragraph and think not, perhaps, 'this person is there', but rather, 'this person can get there'. This writer can write. If you are an agent or editor, then I hope you find that jolt of recognition here. One of the purposes of this anthology is to get students' work into readers' hands, and particularly readers who can take that work onward.

The other purpose is to get students' work into their own hands. Today I dug out the anthology in which I first appeared and squirmed afresh at my photograph (it looks a lot like the sun from Teletubbies). But I was also taken by the memory of holding my first real printed words.

That pleasure and pride came back for me, as I know it has for many others. For those published here, to pick up the anthology in future years will be to find a notch left on a tree. This is where I was. I came this way.

Teaching writers is a frightening privilege. People arrive in the seminar room with the contents of their hearts, with their fears and capacities and bad habits. My job is to give them the space to learn from and find one another, to see where they fit in. My job is also to watch them, and deduce what they might need to hear, to become the best writers they can be.

To bring this anthology into being, the students do all their own editing, designing and managing. We staff give one or two pointers, but that's all. The students put in a huge amount of work to make this happen, and the result belongs only to them. I am utterly unable to be objective about this book, because my fondness and respect for the writers collected here is unbounded.

Perhaps what startles me most, each year, is the variety to be found in the writing. Crammed between these covers are worlds and worlds. Lovers swimming in a lake. A city built inside the bones of a giant. A valuable pig, half-drunk on fallen mangoes. Lancelot rising up again from his mound, to scratch his head at the state of a Britain, of fracking and fake news.

Some of those whose work appears here will go on to be professional authors and poets. Others will go on to be part of arts organisations, to be journalists, to be teachers, to be bakers and music-makers, to be publicists, to be social workers, to be mothers and fathers. They will remain extraordinary writers.

I am very proud of them, and I hope they're proud of themselves.

Beth Underdown

Lecturer in Creative Writing,
The University of Manchester

MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY VII

David Adamson

David Adamson is working on his first novel and writes poetry as well as reviews on anything, and the occasional script. He lives and works in Manchester. After studying English Literature at the University of Sheffield, he became the ghostwriter for Manchester author and former international criminal, Colin Blaney, publishing two books. His experiences in this work have inspired his black comic novel, 'Y'Know'. Whilst ghostwriting he earned his money by tutoring GCSE English to faintly interested teenagers. He likes omnivorous conversation and Manchester City, always managing to include the latter.

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Everybody's Jane Fonda

I've died on so many hills
the Ordinance Survey wrote my obituary.

But I'm not the only one:
everyone seems to be lugging something

behind them, be it
a boycott or a crusade you don't remember

being so heavy.
If you're not prepared

to scramble across the after-dinner drinks
are you really on the right side of history?

I've missed trains
scrubbing away at the distinction between actor and actress.

We are, all of us,
under the placard, each a beatnik

in the dwindling dusk
of Lewinsky and Lennon,

giving the old ways
one last whirl, while the lights

inside the tower
blink off as in a sitcom,

the last chopper leaves
with captains of industry clinging

to the landing skids
and a sulphuric breeze blows in.

Tom, 25, an English graduate, replies to an ad and writes the memoirs of Gerry, 47, a Mancunian ex-criminal. It sells very well, and they embark on a book tour, accompanied by Gerry's two friends and his old fence, along with a bus driver. A week before the tour, Gerry, proudly free of drink and drugs for the last eight years, slips down a set of stairs and damages his back, requiring strong painkillers. This extract finds us halfway through the tour, the group taking a day off in Stratford-upon-Avon.

Y'Know

The waiter returned with a tray of drinks, and as he set them down Gerry checked his watch. Reaching into his inside pocket, he brought out the pill bottle and placed it on the table in front of him.

'What's that taped to it?' said John.

'The prescription,' said Gerry, opening the bottle and pouring two tablets out into his palm. He tipped them into his mouth and washed them down with the last of his cup of tea.

'Two?' said Jam.

'One or two, yeah'

'If you gave me two Trammys I'd be on my arse.'

'I've got a high threshold.'

'Yeah,' said Jam, 'don't remind us. We all remember '02, the Iggy Pop Ice Bath.'

'I'd just got that grouting done as well,' said Cuffs, and he and Jam chuckled as if recalling some faux-pas, a blocked toilet or using an old girlfriend's name.

'What did we call you after that?' said Jam.

'The Blue Nun,' said Cuffs, wiping the beer from his top lip, 'on account of your habit.'

The others laughed. Gerry smiled and looked at the shallow remains of his tea, 'Haven't thought about that in a while.'

'Sorry, Gerry, we're just messing,' said Cuffs, before pointing an accusatory finger at Jam, 'Besides, you ate two E's the size of dog biscuits last night.'

'Yeah,' said Jam, laughing, 'and I'm on my arse.'

'Well you are in your mid-forties' said Gerry, his eyes fixed on the swilling specks of loose tea, 'it becomes a bit tragic after a while.'

The waiter put two plates down at the table and Brillo quickly picked up his cutlery, 'Get that down you, Cuffs, and we'll head off. Who fancies a walk down the river?'

By mid-afternoon the pale clouds had dissipated, gradually thinning like cheap fabric until the sky emerged. After lunch they walked down the narrow lanes to the old town to join the river at its bend. They reached Holy Trinity Church,

which sat by the river, the willow trees draped like set dressing, crowding the churchyard. Wandering the perimeter of the building, they read the sign saying that Shakespeare's grave was inside and went in search of it. They read the dates, 1564–1616, and figured out he died at 51, all except John and Tom gripped by a brief silence. Jam decided he'd probably died of syphilis and so was asking for it, that if he'd spent less time with London brass he'd have written another twenty plays, and could've been buried somewhere more important like Westminster. Brillo shrugged and headed back outside, beckoning the others to follow.

They walked under a canopy of willows and past a man with a group of rowing boats moored to a jetty, eventually breaking through into the shadow of the RSC building. To their left, framed between the trees is if on purpose, was The Dirty Duck pub. Cuffs turned around to face the rest of the group.

'Anyone fancy a quick one?'

The two and a half hours that followed were spent around the hulking oak table by the bay window, while a circuit to the bar quickly established itself with carpet-eroding regularity. An unspoken rota of rounds firmly set, they quickly fell into the kind of ragged mania that can only come from rectifying a hangover-cum-comedown with an afternoon in the pub. The walls were crowded with monochrome portraits of actors, and special attention was given to John Thaw's Mancunian credentials. Brillo embarked on a reverential lecture about The Sweeney reruns and their formative influence on him becoming a fence, taking the cackling encouragement from the others to delve into his other bizarre claims. Twice throughout Jam's phone buzzed, and he swiftly silenced "Jack" without breaking the rhythm of his laughter.

As Brillo explained just how it was that Nicky Butt owed him a favour, Gerry sat with a benign and dopey smile, chuckling at the baffled asides from the others. He went to the toilet, and once inside the cubicle, brought out his tablets and took one, putting a second in his shirt pocket. He returned to the room with a slight lolling gait, his limbs had become more slack and ungainly and he could feel the skin under his eyes sagging. Jam, after returning from cadging a rare cigarette from outside, sat down and announced that after their final pint they should have a boat race. As John went outside to acquire the boats, the others giddily finished their pints.

'Right.' said Cuffs, 'Boat One: Gerry, Tom and Brillo. Boat Two: Me, Jam and John.'

Wrestling with the oars, they rowed themselves into something resembling a starting line, while the boat man looked on with a mix of concern and bemusement.

'That second willow over there, that's the finish line. Give us a starting gun, John.'

John let out a sheepdog whistle and they frantically propelled their boats into motion, Gerry and John sat in the sterns. As they picked up momentum, it became apparent Gerry's boat was the likely winner. Jam pushed towards them, and Cuffs reached out an arm, rocking them forcefully. The spindly boat swayed and shook, and Gerry slipped off the bench seat, hitting his back. He winced and looked over at the others.

'Give it a rest!'

Readjusting, Gerry turned away from them and took out his tablets. He opened the top of the bottle and held it above his open palm. As the tablets began to shift and emerge from its mouth, Cuffs grabbed the side of their boat and rocked it, howling manically. Gerry lurched forward to the edge of the boat and the bottle fell from his hand. Water quickly filled its open top and it plunged below the surface.

'The fucking hell was that?!' said Gerry, standing up.

'It's only a-'

'-No, I've just fucking...shit! Shit!'

The others glanced at each other. A panicked look on his face, Gerry began checking under the bench seat.

'What?' said Tom.

'Everyone just shut up for a sec' he shouted, feverishly checking the floor of the boat and the water at their side.

He gave up and grabbed the oars from Brillo, rowing them to the side of the river. As the boat clattered into the side he scrambled out and onto land. Batting away their confused calls, he wiped down his trousers and walked off towards the town.

'Gerry! Where you going?!' shouted Cuffs, turning to the others, 'What was that?'

Jam and Brillo shrugged in bemusement, and they looked at Tom, 'Gone on, you're young, you can catch him.'

'Fine.' said Tom, climbing out onto the side. He looked up at the fading daylight and towards the lane Gerry had hurried down, then followed it towards the town centre.

After two hours Tom had combed every pub, restaurant and bus stop, and now stood at the top of Henley Street. The Tudor lamp posts reflected in the empty windows of the souvenir shops and tea rooms. He made his way down the street, and saw a man sat on a bench under one of the lamps, his head in his hands in a pose of intense concentration. Tom sat down next to him.

'Alright Gerry.'

Gerry looked at him, 'Oh, alright Tom.'

He returned to gazing at his shoes, and after an agitated pause he looked to Tom.

'I'm sorry about that, it's just...y'know-'

'Yeah.'

'-my back. It's giving me real gyp.'

'Yeah, I get it. How is it now?'

Gerry stared ahead, lost in thought.

'Gerry?'

'Hmm?'

'How is it now?'

'Oh, yeah, not good.'

Another pause descended on them, the lamp above them giving out a quiet drone. As they both sat looking ahead, a repetitive, squeaking sound slowly travelled up the street. They looked to their left and saw an old woman, arthritically bent over her shopping trolley as she pushed it over the uneven pavement. Gerry looked at her and slipped into a perfect stillness for a few moments. He turned to Tom.

'Follow me a sec.'

Gerry approached the old woman, holding one hand up in a sign of goodwill. Tom stood up and followed.

'Excuse me, love?' said Gerry, inflecting his voice slightly.

She looked at Gerry and, after seeing the weary smile on his face, softened, 'Yes?'

'Would you like some help? I hate to watch you struggling with that thing.'

'Oh, that's very kind of you. These cobbles,' she said, relinquishing the handle.

'Can we help you take it back home?' he said, nodding to Tom, 'It's no trouble.'

'That would be a great help, thank you, dear. I don't live far.'

'You're very welcome.' he said, taking the trolley by the handle, 'It's this way is it?'

Katherine Bosworth

Katherine Bosworth is from a small market town in Cambridgeshire. She now lives in Didsbury, where she spends time walking through botanical gardens and writing her first novel. In 2017, she completed her degree in English & American Literature and French at the University of Kent, where she was President of the French Society, and produced content for the Publishing Society. She then worked in customer service for one year, and was mentored by a senior copywriter there. During her MA Creative Writing course, she aided the production of several creative writing workshops in schools, and edited the copy for this anthology.

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Heather's Journey

Heather's steps directly followed those of the police officer, and her eyes descended from the officer's head down to her legs. The officer's gait was wide like a cow's, and her legs were masses of swinging flab. Heather continued to watch as she trudged into the small box room at the end of the corridor. As they passed, different noises wafted in and out of earshot: shouting, pens tapping on desks, and mumbling. In the room, Heather sat down opposite the police officer, and saw her hovering over an official-looking document.

'Let's begin with your full name,' said the officer.

'Heather Jones,' she replied.

'J-O-N-N-S?' the police officer asked, the letters slurred in her Croatian accent. Heather smiled reluctantly, her face twitching slightly, and meekly corrected her. The police officer didn't look up at Heather, only writing on the sheet in front of her. Heather's stomach tensed. Heather stared, willing the officer to look at her and end this nervous feeling. She kept staring. The officer had dark brown eyes, and thick blonde curls that weren't symmetrical on both sides.

'You are happy in English?'

'Yes, that's fine.'

'Great, so what happened?'

'I was walking through town,' Heather gulped, 'and someone kidnapped me.'

'Where did it happen?'

'By the river,' she mumbled.

'On the river, where?'

The police officer scribbled, and then looked up at Heather sharply. Heather felt relieved that she was finally looking at her. A brief thrill of human connection.

'I don't know where!' said Heather.

'Okay... What can you remember...?' asked the officer.

Heather breathed in slowly and looked at the wall behind the officer.

'He was tall, bald, I think he was in his forties.'

'Race?' she sighed.

'White. He was Croatian, he told me.'

'Did he say anything else?'

Heather froze.

'Nothing really, nothing else except that,' she said, hoping she sounded convincing.

'Did he have a weapon?' The officer's expression was now one of disbelief, her eyebrows raised and lips pursed.

'A knife.' Heather's heart beat intensely. She didn't know where that had come from.

'Did he threaten you?'

'No... I mean yes actually, he said he would stab me.'

'Yes or no?'

'Yes. He threatened to use it if I tried to run away,' she said, committing to this alternate story. The officer squinted her eyes slightly.

'Wait, I thought he didn't say much...?'

'He didn't... He didn't really... but then he took me to an apartment, I don't really know where. It was really dark. He handcuffed me, and then-'

'Okay... I think that's all I need, let's finish there.'

Heather was stunned. She wanted to tell her all about what had happened in the apartment, but the police officer was already walking around the table towards the door. Heather stood facing her.

'You can go now. Interview finished.' The officer smiled slightly, but her eyes were glazed over with boredom.

'...finished?'

'Yes, goodbye now.'

Heather turned around to exit, and walked swiftly away from the interview room, her mind racing with regret. The interview had happened so quickly that only now could she slow down to think. The other women in that apartment were trapped there. The officer didn't even know where the apartment was. She stared directly at the ground as she walked away, and kicked the pebbles beneath her feet. She could almost hear the screaming from the women in the apartment.

Heather turned around, and walked back towards the police station. The

curly-haired officer from before was still walking down the corridor.

'Excuse me,' Heather said. The officer turned around.

'I have to tell you more details about the kidnapping.'

'That's enough, we are very busy.'

'There are women trapped in that apartment!'

'In the apartment, that you don't know the location of, in a story that keeps changing every two minutes?'

'It's true what I'm telling you!'

The officer rolled her eyes and walked away. Heather whimpered and left too.

Heather stared out at her surroundings. The square cobbled tiles under her feet were beige, and she could feel the heat rising from the ground through the soles of her sandals. The pavements were cracked at the kerbs, dishevelled and nearly broken. She looked at a tree further down the road which reminded her of the palm trees she had seen in films. It had long, thin wispy leaves and a thick hairy trunk. Not quite a palm tree, but it seemed exotic nonetheless. She looked back down at her feet, pale and wrapped in the plastic sandals she had bought from the market in Cambridge.

After looking out for a few moments, she started to remember where she had come from in the police car, and walked back along the same route. She counted at least five police cars driving into the police station as she left. Each car had passengers in the back seat, and Heather glared in at them as the cars drove by. She could see that the people in the cars were a variety of ages and colours. The cars parked up in front of the station, and as Heather walked on, she looked back to see the passengers now being led inside by the police officers. All of the officers were walking with their legs far apart, just like the one who had interviewed her. Heather remembered how the police officer hadn't believed her.

...in a story that keeps changing every two minutes? Heather replayed the officer's words in her mind. She shivered.

Heather felt a sudden pang of hunger, and looked across the road to see people smiling and eating at café tables in the sunshine. She kept walking, but stopped when she reached a crossroads, seeing that the new road was recklessly busy. Staring ahead, she looked at the road signs to her left and right. Cars were bolting down the roads either side. She shuddered and turned around, walking towards where she had come from. She focussed on finding shelter as quickly as possible.

She waved her arms out at a taxi, which was driving by slowly, and heard an aggressive PAP PAP of its horn as it drove away. As she approached the police station once again, she saw a stationary taxi and opened its door.

'Dobar dan!' the taxi driver said. He had short black hair and large arms that were difficult to ignore. The muscles bulged out of his short sleeves. He wore a silver wristwatch on his right arm that glinted when the sunlight hit it. He kept

the watch face in view as he turned around, by manoeuvring his elbow across his chest.

‘Sorry I-’

‘English?!’

‘Yes, English,’

‘How are you today madam?’

‘I’m alright, thank you. How are you?’

‘I’m right as rain!’ the man laughed, rolling his r’s. Heather laughed back hesitantly.

She closed her eyes for only a moment and remembered that she had escaped her kidnappers with only the clothes on her back. She desperately ran her hands underneath her bottom and into her back pockets. In the deep crevice of the left-hand pocket was a tightly rolled-up scrap of paper. She pulled it out and unrolled it quickly. It was a five euro note. She must have put it there when she left England.

‘Where are you going today?’ he asked.

‘To the nearest hotel please,’ she replied.

‘Ah, the Kolovare is near,’

With that, the car sped off down the road. Heather couldn’t help thinking that it was further than he had suggested when he had said the word ‘near’. There must have been a hotel closer than that. It felt like she had been in the taxi for at least ten minutes. When they finally arrived, she clutched the note and took a breath in.

‘Thirty-five kuna,’ the taxi driver said, looking at her through the rear-view mirror.

Heather’s heart rate suddenly increased.

‘This is all I have.’

She handed the note over, hands shaking.

The taxi driver nodded and handed her some coins.

Heather pushed the car door open to exit. The chilled, static atmosphere of the taxi gave way to the dry and screeching heat of the outdoors.

‘Thank you, have a good day,’ the taxi driver said.

Ali Buchan

Ali Buchan is a writer and illustrator. Following a brief stint as a professional rugby player, he took writing jobs in politics, PR and advertising, before deciding to pursue his dream of becoming an author. He lives and works in Manchester.

The Girl with No Name is an illustrated story for children aged 7 and up. Examples of illustrations can be found on Instagram at [@alibuc](#).

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The Girl with No Name

Once upon a time, not so very long ago, there lived a girl with no name. For reasons which will become clear, she stayed with her auntie and uncle in a small terraced house. Her auntie and uncle, it's fair to say, were not what you would call nice people. They hadn't made any effort to find the little girl's name. They hadn't even bothered to give her a nice new one. As a matter of fact, they hadn't given her very much at all, apart from a great many tellings off.

When she was extremely small, the girl with no name wasn't able to speak and so she stayed silent when her auntie and uncle shouted. And how they shouted! When they shouted at her, which they often did, they called her 'You!'. When they shouted at each other, which they *always* did, especially if there was a crooked, bony finger pointed at a place just between her eyes, they called her 'She!' or 'Her!'. She never, ever cried.

When she stopped being *extremely* small and became instead merely very small, two things happened. The first thing that happened was that she learned to speak (really quite well, for that matter). This she did all on her own, which is rather a difficult thing to do when you come to think about it. The second thing that happened was that she realised her silence made her auntie and uncle shout *even* louder. Just by keeping her mouth closed she could make their faces turn from pale pink to the brightest red at will! It became something of a game to her.

If her uncle snorted, 'You are a wicked, wicked child!' with his nostrils flaring like an angry bull's, the girl with no name wouldn't say a word. If her auntie hissed, 'Why don't you ever punish her? She must be punished!' with the whiskers of her moustache bristling like the fur of a frightened cat, the girl with no name said nothing at all.

'She's your problem!'

'I didn't even want her!'

No matter what they said, their words were always met with silence. And if you looked really, really hard, you might see a smile trying its hardest to escape from the corners of the girl's mouth, as she watched the steam spew from her auntie and uncle's ears. She had to bite down to make sure it couldn't wriggle out.

The girl with no name had a secret that nobody else knew. She owned a little pocket mirror that her grandma had given to her just before she died. She kept it very well hidden, because she knew the precious silver mirror would be taken away from her straight away if it were ever spotted.

Every night, when her uncle's snores were echoing like a hundred horses around the bare white walls of her bedroom, she took the little mirror from its hiding place (even you, reader, are not allowed to know where that was) and opened it up. She blinked her eyes and watched the mirror do the same. No matter how she moved her mouth – and she moved it in all kinds of funny ways – the mirror would copy her. When she had quite finished pulling faces for the night, she gave the mirror a kiss and put it safely back in its special, secret place.

One night, after she'd turned her auntie and uncle a very peculiar shade of puce, the girl with no name, who by now was turning from a very small girl into a girl who was merely small, decided that it really wouldn't be so bad to have someone to talk to. This was how she came to make friends with her mirror.

'Hello mirror,' said the girl.

'Hello little girl,' said the mirror. 'How do you do?'

'Very well, thank you,' she replied. 'What's your name?'

'I don't have a name,' said the little mirror.

'Really?' said the girl. 'What a coincidence! I thought I was the only one! What happened to yours?'

'Oh, I've had a hundred names and a thousand faces,' said the mirror, 'and if you've had a hundred names and a thousand faces, then you have no name at all, at least not a real one.'

'What a curious thing to say,' said the girl.

'You're young,' said the mirror, 'but I'm very old. The young, I'm glad to say, don't know what it means to have lived by many names and many faces.'

'I can make lots of faces,' said the girl with no name. 'I make them at night time when nobody apart from you can see.'

'I know you do! They're very funny. Even before you spoke to me, I knew I liked you because you made me laugh,' said the mirror. 'But how have you come to have no name at all? This is a problem indeed, because you're a young girl and not an old mirror like me. All little girls and boys have a real name. You must have lost yours. Perhaps it ran away.'

'I *thought* I knew my name,' said the girl. 'For a long time I thought I was

called *You*, or perhaps *She*, or maybe even *Her*, because that's all my auntie and uncle call me. Now I know that they aren't real names for real girls. Then I wondered if my name was *I*, because when I come to think about me, if I have a feeling or some funny thing like that, I is what I call myself. But it seems that everybody calls themselves I, so I'm sure it can't be my real name.'

'How awful!' said the mirror. 'You must find your name. It has to be out there somewhere. It's very important that you find it. If it's lost for good, then you might never be found.'

'Another curious thing to say,' said the girl with no name. 'I don't need to find myself. I'm right here.' The girl yawned and the mirror yawned back. 'I must admit, I don't understand everything you say, but I do like you. If you'll excuse me, I'll go to sleep now. It was nice to talk to you, little mirror.'

'It was nice to talk to you, too, little girl. I've seen many people, but you're the first one who has spoken to me. I'm very grateful to you. I promise I'll help you find your name.'

'Goodnight, mirror, and thank you,' said the girl.

'Goodnight,' said the mirror.

It was not many days after her conversation with the mirror that the girl with no name lost her auntie and uncle. One day, she woke up after a sleep rich with dreams and there they weren't. Or rather there she wasn't, because the girl with no name wasn't where she had expected to be. She wasn't surrounded by the four bare, white walls of her bedroom, looking up at the bare, white ceiling. Instead, she was in the corner of a large and draughty room, looking through the darkness at lots of other beds. She counted them up (the girl with no name was good at counting). There were seven. On each of the beds was a lump. Here and there the lumps moved a little this way or a little that way under the covers, and the beds quietly creaked and squeaked.

With my bed, that makes eight, thought the girl. I wonder where I am! And how on earth did I get here? She was, you understand, a little scared (though by no means very scared). In her arms, much to her relief, was her threadbare, one-eyed rabbit. His tummy was hard and round and heavy, just as it had been the night before (if you happen to guess why the rabbit's tummy was hard and round and heavy, please don't tell anyone at all!). The rabbit had a name. He was called Rabbit. She loved Rabbit very much. As long as Rabbit was with her, she thought, everything would be okay.

The girl with no name hugged Rabbit tightly and pulled the blanket up to her eyes. She lay like that for a long time, staying as still as possible so as to make sure her bed didn't creak or squeak like the others. She watched, peeking out over the covers, as the morning came in through the long, dark curtains, and she thought about what the day might bring.

By and by, the soft glow of the morning pushed the night-time to the far end of the room. There were two beds down there in the darkness, one on either side. On the first was a very large lump. The noises it made reminded her of her uncle's great galloping snores, although these ones were a good deal softer. On the second bed, the lump was hardly a lump at all. Even peering through the gloom, she could see two skinny, sticky legs and two skinny, sticky feet poking out from the end of the duvet.

'This is likely to be a very strange day indeed,' the girl with no name whispered to Rabbit, before she dozed off once more.

'Get up!' said a loud voice. 'Breakfast time! Dressing gowns and slippers at the double!'

From under the covers the girl heard a great rustling and bustling. She could feel her heart beating hard and she pressed Rabbit close to her face.

Eventually, the rustling grew quiet and the bustling went away and, after a big, deep breath and a count of three, the girl and her Rabbit pulled the blanket back from their eyes.

'3.....2.....1.....Now!'

There was nobody there.

The other seven beds had lost their lumps and were now neatly-made and empty. The long, dark curtains, had been pulled back to reveal long, bright windows and the girl with no name could see tiny specks of dust dancing weightlessly in the sunlight. Next to her bed there had appeared a chair. Under the chair was a pair of slippers, and on the chair, beneath a piece of paper, was pile of neatly folded clothes. On the top of the pile was a blue dressing gown. As it happened, blue was the girl with no name's favourite colour.

She picked up the piece of paper and began to read:

Here are some clothes for you. Make sure you put on the dressing gown and the slippers, then come to see me in my office. Turn left out of the room and follow the corridor until the very end. I'm looking forward to meeting you.

Miss Storey

P.S. You may bring your rabbit.

The girl with no name sat up and inched herself to the side of the bed. Her feet didn't touch the ground – she was still only small, remember – and she spent a moment swinging them back and forth thinking that this was really quite an important moment. She held Rabbit's paw tightly and, after another count of three, she pushed off the bed and set her bare feet on the wooden floor. The polished wood felt good beneath her toes, although it was a little chilly. She

pulled the slippers out from under the chair and stepped into them.

‘They’re far too big, Rabbit,’ she whispered.

Then she picked up her blue dressing gown and began to put it on.

‘This is far too big as well. It’ll sweep along the floor. But look! There’s a name inside the collar. It says *Katie Jones*. I wonder if that’s me. If it is, somebody must believe me to be a lot bigger than I actually am.’

The girl with no name checked the rest of the clothes on the chair. All of them had little tags and on all of the little tags was the name Katie Jones.

Feeling more and more hopeful that here, in this strange, new place, she might find her name, she made her bed like the others and popped Rabbit into her dressing-gown pocket. She picked up the piece of paper with Miss Storey’s instructions and began to shuffle and scuffle towards the big, heavy door that led to the whatever-was-outside. She tried to walk, but each time she lifted her foot it would come clean out of her slipper! Fortunately, the soles of the slippers were good at sliding over the polished floor, but even so the hem of her dressing gown kept on getting caught beneath them. Slipping here, tripping there and looking altogether like a very nervous roller-skater, she eventually made it across to the other side of the room.

The girl with no name breathed in deeply, put one hand on the polished brass knob and grabbed Rabbit’s paw with the other.

‘3.....2.....1.....Now!’

The great door – it was fully twice her height! – groaned open. She stepped through and looked about.

Suzi Clark

Suzi Clark is primarily a poet and secondarily an author. She is currently based in Manchester. Her poetry ranges in theme and style: from confessional, to exploratory of others' predicaments; and from seemingly simple observational poems, to poems with seams of richly textured metaphor. She is also currently working on a character-driven fantasy epic called *An Accidental Evil*, and a satirical horror novella, *Dark Tourism*. The latter explores modern-day colonialistic beliefs in contemporary Britain whilst the former is fuelled by the intrigue of messy interpersonal relationships among those upon whom society has ordained the most importance.

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It's About Chess

I was friends with the school chess champion back in sixth form. In Lithuania, Zilvinas had competed in national level chess tournaments. I challenged him to a game. I was seventeen and irrecoverably ill. Obsessive compulsive disorder had ripped through my brain like claws through a woollen jumper. All I did was worry and wash and hope not to wet myself and hope to die. Stop reading this poem and look at the back of your hands. If you're old, your hands will be marred with crease-lines like roughly woven cloth. Every line of mine was red, all the time. And I applied hand sanitizer around 40 times a day. I'm sure you've got lemon juice or vinegar in a cut before. Anyway, I won the chess game.

And I was over the moon. I boasted to all our friends.

A month or so later there was an assembly. I'd never been to one before, because we'd had to sit on the floor. Sixth form afforded us the luxury of squeaky plastic chairs. So, there I was. Counting in my head. Checking the levels of contamination from sitting in a shared chair, checking the levels of contamination from my neighbour's shoe brushing my leg, checking the levels of contamination from the rain that had fallen on me from a drain pipe earlier that morning. Using my numeric system. Deciding I'd have to disinfect my bag and the edges of my books again. And yes, of course, you shouldn't get paper wet, especially not every day. All my exercise books were curled at the edges. No one ever commented.

Anyway, the assembly was about a chess tournament the school team had

won, with Zilvinas at the helm.

Apparently, he'd won every game he played apart from one. The one he lost had been against a very keen year 7. The teacher didn't say that Zilvinas had let the year 7 win. He didn't need to, it was implicit. It's funny, because I was a year 7 once. It's funny, because I was dying, even then, and I'd never really had a childhood. It's funny, because Zilvinas treated me like a child, and I knew death intimately, and I beat death at chess every day.

Einwanderer

Toy-Thalia perches proudly.
She is cardboard, surprised at her luck:
or rather, she thinks she should be grateful,
and yet she remembers the proverb:
one shouldn't praise the day
before the evening.

Toy-Thalia stands with tentative longevity,
a theatre play-thing built for posh children,
far from her heyday in a Hamburg home;
now she is tucked in the top room
of this small Midlands museum,
where passing old women comment,
"the kids here and now,
wouldn't have the time of day for that."

Her label dates her to way back,
"the 19th century" – she blushes,
red blossoms between her columns
and pink amongst her friezes -
embarrassment that her age is so displayed.

Toy-Thalia stands a metre tall
in her mahogany glass-fronted case.
Her room is carpeted in gloomy-shadow red,
an attempt to evoke the glory of her namesake,
but lit by a square of dim halogen bulbs
arranged on a grey ceiling
to the left of the damp patch;
perhaps she feels cheated?
She travelled nearly 800km to be displayed here.

Toy-Thalia perhaps thought emigration
to the arts and heritage sector
would bring her the admiration
and adoration she has missed over the years.
And now she is here, perhaps she feels naked?

Toy-Thalia, nevertheless, has staged for us a scene.
To begin is easy, to persist *ist eine Kunst*,
and so, her backscene is decorated
with oddly rigid drapes,
which look, to all the world,
(the few who happen to gaze this way)
like the stop-motion dancing limbs of an arachnid
trapped within a glass cage.
She is prepared for a performance,
audience optional at this Eastern stage.

Toy-Thalia, nevertheless, has staged for us a scene,
and so, two small girls, ballet dancer figurines,
flimsy children, clutching
thorned roses to their chests,
stand near her centre stage
but each is just slightly East or West.

Toy-Thalia, nevertheless, *ist eine Künstlerin*.
And so, in her decorative, sliding wings
a star-burst fountain stands
and represents her faded dreams,
distant from the action on stage
like a sunset: always out of reach,
her dreams of recognition forever recede.
She is out of the rain and into the eaves.
And the museum's passing guests
do not linger long, just long enough
to laugh at her strange ways.
She is too old for "nowadays".
She is far too East for West.

The following passage is an extract from a novella called Dark Tourism which follows white British couple Sandra and Charles Jones as they journey to Kerala, India to visit an ancient snake-infested tower. Charles has come with the intent of stealing an ancient relic from the top of the tower. Initially, Sandra just wanted to get a tan and impress her friends in Tunbridge Wells. Despite being warned repeatedly by locals not to go near the haunted tower Sandra and Charles both have their own private reasons for believing that they must. The contemptuous couple will soon find that the local superstitions regarding Bhoot tower are well founded...

Dark Tourism

Sandra contemplated which room to try next. What if her husband had moved aside one of the stones in an attempt to explore off the beaten track? That seemed like something he would do, and sure enough, one of the archways was only partially obscured by a slab pushed ajar. Weeds and dirt looked to have recently been moved aside too. Charles must be in this room.

As Sandra entered, the room remained dark, no faintly glowing walls, just a slight hissing sound.

‘Charles? Are you in here?’

‘Sandra? I’m here.’

‘Where’s here? I can’t see a bloody thing and my phone is dead.’

‘Me neither, but I’ve found something in a – compartment I guess? – in the wall. It feels like an ancient coin. Could be valuable.’ Charles replied excitedly. ‘Anyway, we should move on from here, I want to get to the top first. I shouldn’t really have let myself get distracted.’

‘I can’t see any light from the exit anymore. Can you put your phone torch on?’

There was a small click and white light flooded half of the room, illuminating five sets of onyx eyes shimmering in hessian-patterned heads. They were stationary in the corner of the room, but as time passed and Charles stood frozen in shock the light from his phone made the cobras more active. They began to writhe together.

‘TURN IT OFF!’ Sandra screamed at the top of her voice. ‘HELP!’

She rushed towards the archway in the darkness, but the way out was fully barred now. The stone slab had moved back into its original place, barricading the room from the rest of the tower. Sandra’s hands thumped repeatedly into the solid stone in front of her. Her knuckles cracked open on the rough granite and she could feel wetness blossoming there.

‘My foot! It’s touching my foot. There’s a snake on my foot!’ Charles’ voice lifted several octaves higher than usual.

‘I can’t die like this.’ Sandra whimpered.

Internally, something made her add *I'll do anything*, and in that moment, Sandra Jones really was willing to do anything to survive.

She heard the viciously loud, low shriek of a bird of prey reverberate in her head like an answering battle-cry, then the stone walls glowed a soft red, growing incrementally brighter. Soon it was like the room was burning with cold fire, as the walls luminesced in deepest red. A whirlpool of shimmering claret steam span into flickering life in the centre of the room and sucked the warmth of the day into it. It spun quicker and quicker, like a telescopic image of a galaxy about to explode. The bird's cry sounded over and over. It came in and out of aural focus as though the source of the sound was in violent motion too. The room was glowing so bright and red that Sandra had to stop watching and hold a hand over her eyes to shield her vision, when she cautiously removed the hand and opened her eyes she saw that an eagle had solidified from within the luminous gas. The last of the red light was fading back into the bird's large breast. The smell of chrysanthemums, burning flesh and carbon mingled in Sandra's nose as she watched dumbfounded. The cobras were now charred remains.

She stood stock still. The eagle stared into her soul.

Eventually she was released from her trance. She began to sob in terror and confusion. Charles started to scream and she swayed where she stood, wondering if she would faint.

ALLOW ME TO HELP YOU. I CAN BE YOUR GUIDE IN THIS TOWER. I KNOW WHAT YOU SEEK. BUT YOU MUST FOLLOW MY WORD. MY WORD WILL BE YOUR WORLD.

The eagle flexed the talons of its large clawed feet. Its massive wings fluttered in the non-existent breeze. Its eyes were the colour of blood.

Sandra steadied herself mentally. She would fight for what she wanted, as she always did. *Don't let me die here.* Sandra demanded in her mind. *I will do as you say.*

Paddy Dobson

Paddy Dobson was discovered in the crab nebula and, until recently, was contained at a secure facility in Manchester. He has since run amok in the creative fields, working first in film and television before returning to fiction writing. As much as he loves science fiction, Paddy's reading has about as much genre consistency as his writing. Thus, his first novel, *Aspect*, is as much a grounded thriller about hunting Nazis in Brazil as it is a cosmic horror adventure about the power and importance of imagination. It features giant reptiles, a utopian acid party and a sad Englishman.

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The prologue of Aspect, a novel.

The Custodian

In the darkness before dawn, the roar of an engine disturbs the slumber of a town. The burbling wake slaps the jetty as the unmarked patrol boat comes to rest. A man, a head higher than the soldiers around him, steps from the boat onto the wooden platform and looks across the river at the township. Platinum hair sweeps across his head. His face, endarkened, holds the shadow of a neat beard. He imparts a quiet order to the man at the helm of the boat, who nods and guns the engine. The front of the old man's shirt is sticky with drying blood.

The old man walks up the shallow slope of the river island, boots sinking in the sand-sludge, as the boat pulls away from the jetty. His bones are heavy. His muscles feel loose and dry beneath his skin. His eyes sting. He had begun to get the sense the previous morning that something had gone wrong. When his men did not return by noon, he knew it.

He assembled a platoon and spent the late hours of the afternoon motoring south through the bloated heat and jungle chatter. Their cadre of boats spanned the river like a steel arrowhead. He watched the sharp prows bisect the tea-black water.

In a clearing some two-hundred kilometres downriver he had found the

remnants of four men, dragged and scattered, snaggletooth, by the water's edge. Mud-soaked, they were no more remarkable than any of the rotting logs on the ochre bank; save for the drag scars, blackened by leaked viscera and faeces. The rebels were gone. So too, was his cache of weapons. The old man felt the weight in the silence of his men as they stood over the bodies of their fellows.

Now, as the man reaches the crest of the hill, two fishermen, readying themselves for the day, nod as he passes. He often conjures a strange fantasy in which all the people of the town know his name, though he himself has not spoken it, nor heard it spoken, in two decades. They had christened him anew in the years of his residence, named him after the pink river dolphins that hunt in the murky currents of the Rio Negro. Boto, they call him.

He knew a fool's errand when he saw one. Tracking the fleeing rebels through the dripping ecumenopolis of sky-tall evergreens and grasping creeper was dangerous. They knew the land better than his men and they had six-hundred million hectares of jungle to hide in. So, he ordered his men back into the boats and pushed further south, to the village of Lastapia.

They arrived in the evening, their shadows lengthening across the wooden jetty at the banks of the village. The babbling ingratitude of children that met them were soon recalled back behind the wary gazes of the villagers, who watched Boto and his men disembark in mute dread.

They wasted no time in corralling the villagers into the centre. Some of the children began to wail when they saw the numbing edifice of their mothers' faces. The elderly tottered about, huddled against the settling chill of the moon. There were no men, no young ones at least. Except one.

Boto's men dragged the man from the hole he'd been hiding in, dug into the natural crevice below one of the huts. There were a few meek cries of woe, but none of the villagers stepped beyond the cage of weapons his men had formed. Boto ordered the man be tied to the gnarled trunk of a great wimba tree.

At first Boto questioned the rebel as politely as he could, in his rough, accented Portuguese. He asked him where the other rebels had fled. He asked him why they had left him in the village. The rebel, eyes slick with hatred, hung lank against the trunk of the tree, arms bound up, twisting red against the ropes. Boto asked the rebel if his comrades came often, to see their wives and children, mothers and fathers. The rebel was silent.

Boto gave a sad shrug and loosed his men on the rebel. They went in slow at first, striking and insulting their countryman with tensed vigor. Then, with a bray-call, they frenzied about him, each clawing to let fly some part of himself onto the bound man.

Boto understood this, though he did not condone it. An unbalance had occurred. A schism in the natural order. His men were not compassionate, nor brotherly. Their loyalty was bought for a salary; a few beers higher than the army's

own meagre pay. Most had not known each other for more than a few months. They'd happily put one of their own in the mud if Boto commanded it. Yet the rebels had, in taking the lives of those four men, taken something irreplaceable from Boto's other men; that fraction of immortality that all soldiers carry with them. A tiny fiction that says, 'it won't be me.'

Boto saw the lineage of their savagery. As he watched his men tear into the rebel, he reminded himself that what he did now was not charged by wrath or vengeance. Rather, he sought to address the same ills his men were too dull to realise afflicted them; he sought to address the equilibrium of the world.

He crouched by the rebel and lifted the man's fatigues with the tip of his pistol. His men stood back, panting. Blood poured freely from a puncture in the rebel's stomach, so dark that it appeared black in the moonlight. Old Boto questioned him until he died, the sweet allure of mercy dangling from his words. Then he gathered his men and marched out of Lastapia, leaving behind a corpse and the lamentations of a mother.

Now he walks past the small bar and the old hotel. Aside from his own house and some fishing huts by the jetty, they are the only other buildings on the island. The owner of the bar, leaning on a wooden pillar, gives a cheerful wave. The man's daughter smiles at Boto. Crossing the veranda at the front of his house, Boto pauses to remove his muddy boots and he leaves them by the door. He crosses the lacquered floor of the main hall in his socks and ascends the stairs.

The tiled bathroom is modelled after a French hotel he'd stayed at, a lifetime ago. He is particularly proud of the porcelain freestanding bath, with its ornate, silver legs, around which he has stored scented soaps, imported from Europe. He looks at himself in the oval mirror. Then, turning the tap, he begins to ladle water onto his blood-soaked shirt.

Pale red water runs down the sides of the white sink. As anticipated, the water does little to wash the blood from his shirt. He removes the shirt and tosses it into the corner of the bathroom. He sees that the blood has soaked through to his vest underneath, a red circle on his stomach.

He walks downstairs to the kitchen. The predawn luminance is bright enough that he doesn't need to switch on the lights. It is still early, but he can no longer wait for coffee. He lights the stove and sets the water to boil. He rubs his sore palms as he waits.

He'd waited in the dark for an hour with his men, sat cross-legged on the damp mulch of the forest floor with rifles on their laps. He need not shush them, there was no muttering and no more questions. They did nothing until the sound of muffled footsteps and quick murmurs came creeping through the undergrowth in front of them. The old man opened his eyes and silently gestured for his men to stand.

They stalked the rebel patrol for hours, heading away from the river and

deeper into the jungle. Then, peeking out beyond a copse of kapoks, the flickering light of campfire.

They crawled up a steep verge on their hands and knees. The rebels had fortified the two paths that led up to their makeshift camp with crude bunkers and barbed wire. Yet the cliffside, they'd left bare. The old man and his men rolled over the edge and crawled on their stomachs up to the first row of tents, where they heard some rebels chatting, with some mirth, about their escapade. One of the rebel seniors told the others to be quiet. Boto and his men waited, unseen.

Tarpaulins shook in the breeze. Then the whip-crack of gunfire sundered the night. They killed the first two men by firing, point blank, through the tents. Panic flared, as chaos engulfed the camp. A box of ammunition was ignited and began to spit and spark like a firecracker, sending bolts of hot lead flying through the starlit air. The rebels scattered and ducked for cover. Wherever they lay or squatted, they were caught in the screaming crossfire of Boto's men. They fell like ragdolls, one by one.

Then Boto walked through the camp, the imprints in the mud filling with oozing blood. The ammunition crate sent out its last few lead pops as it fizzled out of fuel. The groans of dying men, calling for their mothers, filled the air. Boto turned a still body over with his boot. The boy's face was half covered in ruby filth. He couldn't have been much older than sixteen. When his lieutenant asked if they should begin loading the stolen weapons back into their crates, Boto shook his head.

'Leave them,' he said. 'And leave the bodies. They will find them in the morning.' With that, Boto set off back towards the river and the lieutenant asked no more questions.

The moka pot screams. He pours coffee out into a mug and drinks. The last two years have run like clockwork. The rebels came, they paid, they took their arms and they left. Boto has watched as the reds had grown from a few idealists with university educations, to a small paramilitary force manned by ex-military opportunists. Their political action had gone from protests in towns to riots in cities, then arson of the regime's property, kidnap and extortion, bombings and raids on regime convoys. There is talk of a Russian in their midst, coordinating their operations with an efficiency the rebels have not known before. It appears that the reds are ready for war.

Old Boto smiles. He wonders if they had finally discovered his trade with the regime, or his trade with the fascist rebels on the other side of the basin. Perhaps they have found out about the American agent. No matter. The wheel had been set in motion.

There is one last task, before the work can begin.

He sets the mug down and goes out of the kitchen, across the hall and down to the basement. It is much cooler here. The rising warmth of the morning outside

has yet to seep into the dark stone walls. He takes a large set of keys from his pocket and unlocks a steel door at the far side of the basement.

The room is dark. On one side is a stack of shelves filled with Party souvenirs, the other has a wardrobe with his old uniforms hung neatly inside, gathering dust. He flicks on the electric light and looks down at the steel case at his feet. With another key, he unlocks the case and moves aside the marked gold bars inside. Feeling around, he finds the false bottom and lifts it. His hand rests on something cool.

He pauses.

This new world is more complex than the last. In war, there had been a strange kind of cohesion to his thoughts. The logic assembled itself. His desires aligned perfectly with the rhetoric of his superiors. He did not question the horror of what they must do because it was apparent that it was necessary. For how else was his mind to preserve itself in the enactment of that duty? Was it so profane to be part of an ordained cycle, to cut back the bracken so that flowers might bloom? He now yearns for simplicity, a time when the rules and customs were clear, where lines were drawn and neatly kept. Nostalgia boils his imagination. His emotions will not cloud his reason.

So, it is strange when, for the first time in many years, Boto feels an odd sensation creep into his chest. A tightness. A feeling of uncertainty.

In his hands is a small prism, perfectly equal on all four of its perfectly smooth sides. It hardly weighs anything. Even in the gloom of the small basement, it appears to shine with a brightness of its own, bringing a clarity to the shadows through the refractions of its crystalline innards. Yet it brings no clarity to the old man, who, even as he stands there, moments into his decision, feels the miasma of doubt cloud his mind.

He locks the door behind him. He proceeds upstairs, holding the prism at his side as he might carry a pair of glasses. Thinking, perhaps, that his feigned disinterest will reduce the significance of what sits in his palm.

Up a second flight of stairs, he walks out onto the balcony. From here he can see the rest of King's Island and the full length of Sao Gabriel da Cachoeira; its white beach and bright riverside buildings, tucked away between dense patches of undergrowth and stooping palm clusters. Between his island and the town, the black river flows.

He places the prism on the oak table at the end of the long balcony. He draws himself up, closes his eyes and takes a long, slow breath. Satisfied, he walks back into the house.

Here he leaves the little prism, in the dank rise of the morning air, across from a town of unknowing sleepers, in the heart of an immense beauty, on a world of minds; bright as snow. Here the sun rises, slivers of sunlight darting through the boughs of the trees to the east, cresting over the dark flow of the wide

river below. As the amber light strokes the walls of the house and creeps over the lip of the balcony, so too does it touch the thirsting side of the prism and its light is divided into the infinite spectrum of the universe.

Toby Hall

Toby Hall writes poetry and short fiction. After studying English at the University of Liverpool, he spent a few years working as teaching support in schools. He continues to work in teaching whilst pursuing a career as a writer. During his two years at The University of Manchester he has had a couple of poems published online. He is currently working towards a collection of short stories, interested in ideas such as the failure to communicate, trauma, mental illness and toxic masculinity. He likes spontaneous acts of absurdity, such as when someone trips in the street but they pretend to have broken into a jog.

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The Day Out

The entire train carriage smelt of the two homeless men. Days without access to basic amenities, at the beginning of the April heat, had caused a dense cloud of smell which emanated here and there throughout the carriage. The train was going from Manchester to Liverpool in the middle of the day, and it was busy: the seats further away from the smell were already taken. I had always supposed myself to be a nice person: understanding, amiable, gentle. Some of these descriptors appear on my dating profile, and it is only as I move towards the middle part of my life, I begin to feel tendrils of wonder curling around the idea that I might use my niceness – not simply as a means unto itself - but as a buffer between me and my shortcomings. I put up with a lot of stupid whims and narrow fancies from people in my everyday life (I work in admin) for the sake of this buffer. But then what's the alternative?

I felt it would have been too judgemental to back out of the carriage and attempt to find a less visceral smell for my journey. Or was it more to avoid the embarrassment that would have befallen me in showing them, and the rest of the carriage, how keen I was to avoid the pair? Either way, I took a seat on the other side of the carriage from where they had set themselves. One was reclining with his feet up, whilst the other perched in swift attention. There was about ten years between them. The older reclining man was Irish, with a ginger beard and a thick

Belfast accent, somewhat muffled by damaged vocal cords and a tendency to slur. The other man was in his twenties, a scouser, who was clearly excited by the way their day was panning out.

He was loudly exclaiming, 'This beats sitting outside the Arndale getting pissed on.' He went on, 'thank fuck we're leaving that shitty accent behind for a bit – I fuckin' hate those dirty Mancs and their accent.' Then he repeated, 'it's better than sitting outside the Arndale getting passed over and pissed on, that's for sure.' He was talking a mile a minute, as people with undiagnosed mental disturbances often do, geysering out language in uncontrollable bursts, and helter skelter associations. It was like he was flicking through a pack of cards, looking for the jokers to expel, but was finding them elusive, and the process of flicking and picking out cards at random was becoming endless.

I learned from my continued eavesdropping (I barely had a choice in this) that they had got their hands on some replica fivers, and were using their unexpected loot to take a day out to Liverpool. There they hoped to meet some acquaintances in a den somewhere in order to, 'Get a pipe going,' as the older Irishman put it.

The younger of the pair was a tall man with a crew cut. He had a large hard skull, eyes which darted here and there in relentless scanning of everyone else, and a thin but prominent scar just below his forehead. As the train moved past Widnes and Irlam, he began to recognise places near where he had grown up, adding intensity to his commentary.

'I spent a few years in a care home at the end of that street there when I was a teenager,' he said. Suddenly he was incredulous and frustrated and exclaimed, 'We've been on this train for an hour and a half now, and not one of these boring cunts has laughed – none of them. Not once!'

As we got closer to Liverpool, he continued to entertain his mate by drawing theatrical attention to the diversity of a residential area near St. Helens. Gesturing like a tour guide he said, 'Over here you have the posh bit, and over that way's the shot bit.' He laughed at his half-rhyme which seemed, like all good jokes, to say a few things at once. However, the sheer aptness of it seemed to unnerve him somewhat, and brought on some of the darker memories he was harbouring.

He began to tell his mate about a young man he'd known who had been shot in the head nearby, and how this man's younger brother – aged sixteen – had hung himself in the aftermath. The impossible alien pain of this teenager, alone with the reality of what had just happened to his brother, unable to see another way out, hung in the carriage like a threat. It was completely silent for a moment, save the steady heartbeat of the train on its tracks.

Then the young man changed tack again. A woman of around thirty, wearing a business suit and carrying a briefcase, came into the carriage, took one look at them, and did what I was beginning to wish I had done: she backed out and walked down to the next carriage. The eccentric rapid-fire scouser began hooting,

and exclaimed that he would love to, 'Dive into that.' He said he would, 'Put on goggles and a snorkel' and that it would be 'time to lose myself in there.' Then he sank into an excitable giggle and a perverse sigh. 'Ah man that was too much there - fuckin' 'ell! I need a wet flannel!'

The rest of the carriage squirmed in our seats. We let him have his moment of misogyny unchallenged; allowed him to humiliate and verbally violate her. We sat there together: small, avoidant, nice.

Ten minutes later, the train pulled into Liverpool. I was beginning to choke on the smell. The pair announced they were sorry to any Mancs they'd offended, with the Irishman performing the punchline, 'but he's not really sorry, in fact he'll fight ya for your boots!' I began to think about how I'd relay this encounter to my friend later at the pub, and I thought about the complexity involved in being a nice understanding man, with socialist values, eavesdropping on two people who were surviving at the sharp end of poverty, mental disturbance, and daily violence. I decided I probably wouldn't mention the moment of misogyny, weak as my response was to it at the time. Inevitably my friend and I would begin to talk over each other almost immediately anyway. That's the way when you try to understand things of a subtle and extreme nature with a friend, over a beer, in a loud crowded pub.

Mary Hastilow

Mary Hastilow has been published in small magazines, and placed in the Kent and Sussex, Wenlock, and McLellan Competitions. She worked in London for many years, housing single people in short-life housing, before moving to rural Herefordshire to concentrate on writing. She also plays the fiddle, and picks fruit for a living.

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The Scythe

Close up the blade was longer than I could even see,
but how hard could it be
to take up the tool of a simple life
and carve a wave into the tide
of clover and meadowsweet lathering the hillside?

I'd read Tolstoy. I recognised the clavicle of steel,
the backbone of its sinuous pole,
handholds offset
to steer the arc of every stroke
and leave behind a neatly-tumbled wake,

but was totally unprepared
for the curve of its weight as the thing swung
like a weather vane in a glancing wind
and severed a sliver of thumb knuckle with its silver tongue.

Cotton Mill Piecer as Pipistrelle

The part of her that has power hangs
under the stairs like an old umbrella,

hunts with her ears, loves when she likes
then makes up her mind whether to open

her womb. Laughs at the thought of a line
between life and death. Slings up and hooks

to the roof a flesh-web veil that shuts out
the world. An owl would relish her delicate

meat, but she's too quick for him; her wings
are made of the finger-bones of a girl

who skips the oncoming waves of the loom,
flick-tacking a hundred snatches a minute.

Harebells

Our spring sisters
are social. All jostle. Crowd
pleasing. So sweetly packed
you can't take your eyes
off them. They ooze blue,
blur roots, clot the woods, flood
the mind's eye
with active indigo just to
prime memory, rise
in a tide dense with promise
to meet the sky

then vanish. We,
on the other hand, linger
here, mostly solitary. Frail
trumpets thin with listening
to the wind's sobs, stems
slight as a stroke
of the pen. Tethered to rock,
we're in it for the long haul,
thrive in all skies
at the level of boot sole. Hard-
wired to the hills, we flutter
through gales and the first snow,
keep expectations
low, tremble at the thud
of anyone who might
look down, and noticing
a pale blue bell, kneel.

A Spell of Weather

They're out there now, slumped bundles of homeless snow. And though we know that's all they are, it's odd how some have stayed behind as if they harbour

an icy permanence. Did something arrive with them that's grown? The stillness of these heaps is an intrusion we want gone, along with silly memories of panic

brimming as the garden strayed into a strange cartography, proportions lost as blizzards hopped and twirled on burning toes beyond the window.

It's hard to work out what to do with such immaculate collapse, except bulldoze a way out and continue to commute, throw off the soporific spell of weather's

little poke at us. The fake arctic that set the rims of buried bottles crooning in the wind, within a week has chilled the world to one pale sheet

of stranded sticks and poppy heads in hieroglyphs we can't make out. Are we empty now, or over-full? We shrug, and shovel up the untidy collateral.

Willow Tree

I would have my willow tree like this one,
alone on the Common, coppiced young,

forgotten, left to grow at will, a wild girl
if ever there was one, in love with her own

interwoven limbs. Nine times richer, nine
back bones where there would have been

one, nine trunks in a sinuous cluster,
chock-full of desire. A century later,

cut back again, head-height this time,
she's sprung a flock of tentacles, babies

all leaping from her arms at once, limbs
kicking, flames licking the sky. So much

reaching out has given her a broad foot,
a large heart. Ancient and free, torn

and lovely, she's not what you'd expect
from a tree. More like a shock of hair

or a sea-anemone, she seems almost
casual – thin leaves an afterthought,

catkins shabby snags of fluff – but come
closer and you'll see how a sudden rush

of growth has laddered her skin. She is
split, pock-marked, littered with lichen

and open-mouthed a thousand times
where the ripped bark curls back in.

Jordan Hayward

Jordan Hayward (born July 9, 1956) is an American actor and filmmaker. Hayward is known for his comedic and dramatic roles in such films as *Big* (1988), *Turner & Hooch* (1989), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *Apollo 13* (1995), *You've Got Mail* (1998), *The Green Mile* (1999), *Cast Away* (2000), and *Captain Phillips* (2013), as well as for voicing Sheriff Woody in the Toy Story film series. He is one of the most popular and recognisable film stars worldwide, and is widely regarded as an American cultural icon.

He can be found @totoafricaremix



in which i ruminate on a scenario whereby i die after losing my head in a literal way following a lawnmower accident, but my body seems to carry on doing its own thing

i'm hoping death will have free shipping, or priority booking options to slide myself into for a long nap among the gravel and freshly dug troughs — but if the carpenters are on strike, or there's yet another nationwide shortage of coffinwood, i can see the light (figuratively) in a burial without borders;

my skull living in a postmortem post-vegan co-op with at least thirty other likeminded skulls, all shading into underground litter en masse, privily dipping the dregs of our consciousness into the ether's jumbo guacamole sharing platter, and quietly asking each other things like *isn't this*

weather nice? or else *what did we do before we lost our skin?* this earth, this oily and callous one, cradles us like an upside down tree bearing the fruit of our severed heads, past-ripe, and i wonder whether i'll ever fall upwards from that splintered branch, back onto my artificially

listless cowboy body, where i can think some important thoughts like *trees are everywhere lately, or there's not enough epiphanies in this town's water supply.* autumn is the coolest month, though my calendar has gone bad, left in the sun for too long, and i'm longing dearly for my

community of skulls in the dark — those carbon lampshades without a flicker in the world. O cunning cremator, brush me aside, turn my body into ash and leave my skull to its own devices. O, the frame deserves the air, let its dust wander beneath the collective shoe — the grey coat on a leaf.

million dollar ideas (in the backseat of my weekend helicopter)

your million dollar idea
is too hot for tv. after 9pm,
you bring out the bison
fur boots, and fill my
home with the postmodern
sounds of snake milk
simmering on the hob.

globalists will tell us
there's only twenty-four
hours in a day, and yet
you spend thirteen hours
working out, five planning
lunch, one practicing
those sea shanties, ten

driving with the top down,
nine working out,
sixteen making deals
with big names, five
not waiting in line at clubs,
and forty minutes
fast asleep. your million

dollar idea doesn't
have any brakes; you're
one step away from
eating pony tacos on
live tv, with the new
gucci contacts on full
display. after lunch,

i'm starting r&d on your
next novel, funded by
the good people at pepsi,
and i jitter at the thought
of finding out what it was
really like to live as a
painter and architect in

sixteenth century florence.
the guest bathroom
in your château has velvet
floors with satin at the
edges, and your wrist
can barely hold the
weight of another watch.

someone has to
wear them. yesterday
you repurposed a custom
himalayan salt lamp
into a scuba diving
helmet, then bought nine
hundred acres near osaka.

my million dollar idea
received a three-trillion
dollar valuation, and
i plan on planting two
trees for every ten
i turn into treehouses.
the surgery was a complete

success, i'm eighteen
foot tall and can see
in total darkness.
i grow my own tuna
in a two-hectare pool.
this scarf is made of pearls.
i play the flute at parties.

Tara Hussain

Tara Hussain is a Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapist, Trainer and Motivational Wellbeing Coach who finds joy & sanctuary in writing. She draws inspiration from her life experiences, faith and personal values, raising awareness about stuff that matters in the world. When not travelling far and wide for work and pleasure, Tara can be found surrounded by friends, food and her family. Some of her favourite things are a cup of tea, good books and scented candles. She also has an interesting collection of teapots and Winnie the Pooh trinkets.



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The Red Shop on the Corner

I indicated right, the green arrow flashing, coming off the busy dual carriageway with a hasty driver stupidly close behind. Why don't they ever slow down? I swung into my front drive and switched off the engine, then fumbled with the key fob, which I'd usually tossed in the drinks holder. I sat for a few minutes combing my fingers through my hair, just breathing. I knew I had to get out and go into my house, but I didn't know what I'd find behind the panelled door.

I'd had a good day at work. I'd discharged my patient, Hannah, after a day of risk management, the last of our seventeen therapy sessions together. She was a young girl, blonde and so skinny. She suffered with perfectionism and PTSD because her mother had committed suicide. She had simply stopped living afterwards, but I had helped her to step back into her life. Hannah isn't her real name, of course, but she's Hannah to me. I need her help.

There is so much about Hannah that reminds me of my daughter, Nafisa, but Nafisa is out of control. My beautiful daughter, twenty-eight-years old and trapped in a prison I can't release her from. This is where the similarities between them end. Hannah got her life back together. She got out on her bike twice the previous week with some graded exposure therapy support. I did that, I thought, but why couldn't I do the same for my own child? What was stopping me from helping Nafisa? I feel like a hypocrite in therapy sessions, like I'm lying to myself and to my clients, because I'm hiding the fact that I'm broken. How can I take

credit for Hannah and all the others when I can't even save my own beloved daughter?

Life was supposed to be good now. I thought I had done my share of suffering. The hardships of the past should have been locked up and left there, yet they had broken free and reared their ugly heads. Nafisa relives every account of the abuse I suffered, every bad memory I had and every bit of anguish through her eroding sanity. I know she does.

I finally let the key fall into the drinks holder not wanting to go inside. I sit a bit longer in the car, waiting on my drive as I stare down at my hands. They have become wrinkled after years of mundane housework. Washing clothes, bleaching pans and clapping balls of chapatti dough between my palms until it expands to the size of a dinner plate. My fingers conditioned to endure the burning when I threw the dough onto the hot thava and flicked the roti over and over until it browned perfectly. Now they sit in my lap, uncomfortable, with the beginnings of arthritis. I only really notice it when I have to peel a clove of garlic or thread a needle. Intricate tasks that wake up the pain. I curl my fingers now until my nails dig into my palms. This is uncomfortable yet I feel relief. I can control the pain. I put the radio on. Smokey Robinson and Marvin Gaye are soothing sounds I can bathe in. At other times I would count the pavestones, or trace their patterns in my mind. I must have sat on the drive for thirty five minutes today preparing for the transition from the normality of work to whatever madness I would find behind that door.

Every event, every knock on the door, triggers chaos and chanting to protect us from harm. The blinds were always kept closed and I couldn't answer the front door if friends came. They stopped coming eventually. We couldn't have CCTV in case we were being watched and television was banned because it would spy on us.

I got out of the car. Everything was going to be ok, I told myself. I turned the key and walked into the porch, then stopped to sweep up the post scattered on the mosaic tiles. As I turned the key in the lock on the main door and entered the hallway, I could hear the sound of running water. It sounded like it was coming from the kitchen. My heart was beating faster now. I dumped my bag and the letters, hurrying towards the kitchen door. Water seeped out from underneath the shut door wetting my shoes, darkening the carpet. I took a deep breath, gripped the cool brass handle and gently pushed it open.

Nafisa stood in the middle of the kitchen; her hands clutching a hammer above her head. Without any thought of danger, for myself, I rushed towards her to grab it from her. We tussled. She wouldn't let go. She screamed at me, 'I need it! I need it!' Her headscarf was slipping off her head, exposing her long brown hair wound up into a knot. Her long jilbab dripped wet at the hems where it had

swept the watery floor. She was clumsy, always so clumsy ever since she was a child, always slipping and sliding. But today she wasn't slipping or sliding. She felt strong and powerful, towering over my five feet and one inch by an extra six inches. I realised for the first time that she was stronger than me, physically; her deranged mind had given her strength beyond her own abilities. But I was her mother. I couldn't let her know I was afraid.

'What are you saying, love, why were you holding the hammer,' I said as softly as I could, once I finally managed to prise it from her. The water had reached my ankles.

'I had to smash the pipes mum, you don't understand. There is a baby. A baby dolphin trapped in the water pipes and I have to rescue it. Can't you hear it? Help me please, it's going to die!' she begged. I dropped to my hands and knees, opened the cupboard and tried to find the source of the leak. A baby dolphin I thought, where was this coming from? The wet floor brought me back to the task at hand. My canvas pumps and suit jacket were drenched as water seeped up to my arms.

'What's happening? Where have you been? I've been waiting,' she shouted down at me. 'I needed you to help me. You're never in, you're never here!'

'Hang on, love, please,' I said, from under the sink. 'Don't say things like that. I'm here helping you now.'

'What's happening?' she yelled in a state of escalating panic, her voice distorted. 'Oh my God what Jinn's have done this? Why is there water everywhere? I was just trying to get the little dolphin out!'

'I don't know, Nafisa. I'm trying to find out. Please just give me a bloody second.'

She came nearer, crouching down, crowding me.

'Nafisa,' I said, hoping to reach the sane part of her. 'How long has the water been leaking?'

'I don't know,' she shrugged. 'I heard the dolphin crying out so came downstairs. I found the hammer and tried to break the pipes and the floor got wet but I wasn't sure what to do next so I just left it. It's not my fault. You're trying to blame me. It's not my fault. You always blame me.'

I couldn't stop the leak. I came out from under the sink and tried to fish my phone out of my handbag.

'What are you doing mum? No! No! Who are you calling? No one can come!'

'Honey, I have to call someone to fix this. I don't know what to do.'

'No, no, no one can come here. They are not allowed, please, they'll bring bad luck and black magic with them. Please!' She put her hand on my shoulder. I shuddered and moved away. Abid, my go to in emergencies guy, answered on the second ring.

'Abid please I have a leak, if I facetime you, can you please tell me how to stop it.' I asked desperately. 'I've come home and the pipes are damaged.'

'I'll pop over, Samra,' he said.

'No, no, Abid, no need to come over, I'm not alone, just some help please, I'll manage.' He got the message and agreed to help me figure out what to do. I managed to connect to facetime him, and his concerned face filled my phone screen as I sank back to my knees.

Nafisa stood close by reciting Qur'anic verses, the one her father had taught her, to protect us from the Jinn and black magic that Abid was sending down the phone. Her iPhone was programmed to play different recitations at full volume. The water hissed. Abid got frustrated that I couldn't find the main valve. Nafisa began to stamp her feet, splashing the water all over the kitchen surfaces.

'You have brought evil into this house!'

She opened the kitchen door and ran upstairs.

I found the valve and the water level dropped. For a moment, there was silence. The mop and bucket were in the corner. I looked at them, then at the floor, and cried. The water on the floor was like tears. I sat on a stool and watched it covering my shoes and soaking my clothes. A baby dolphin... it felt like the final straw.

Trauma was part of Nafisa's life from the start. When Nafisa was little, her father Ali and I were still living together then. We weren't happy but we were married and that was good enough for me. We lived in a flat above a shop. It was his shop. He hated that he was married to me, hated the way it cramped his style because he wanted to be young, free and single. He called me Fred. That was my nickname. Short for Freddie Krueger, because Ali said I was ugly like a creepy monster. It made me sad because I loved him. He only loved all the attention he got from women who came into the shop. They would time their visits to catch him when he came to collect the takings, and stand chatting for longer than necessary, flirting. They didn't care that he was married to me. He was in his element as a ladies man. It wasn't a happy time, but it was good enough. It shouldn't have been just good enough, but it was.

Nafisa was young and constantly needed my attention. She was a lovely child. She was always sensitive. When I cried, which was often, she would climb onto my lap and with small, soft hands gently wiped my tears, streaking them across my face. I know now she was searching for reassurance while wanting to help me feel better. Sometimes she would simply rest her head against my chest and pat me like she patted her dolls. She absorbed the energy around her. Maybe it was empathy that broke her brain.

Briefly in the early days, Ali would show odd moments of compassion and love. He was capable. One day when Nafisa was nine months old, she had managed to scabble to the stairs, and tumbled down the last couple in her quest to practice her climbing skills. Ali was there to quickly lift her up into his arms and hold her close. He recited Ayat Ul Kursi in her ears, whispering the soothing

verses to calm her, gently stroking her tear stained face crumpled in sadness. It was a moment I tucked away and cherished because it was so rare.

We stayed in the shop from seven am to midnight every day for years, only venturing out eventually when Nafisa was old enough to go to school. I was allowed a twenty minute round trip each morning, clockwatching frantically, running walking so I wasn't a minute late. I didn't want to get into trouble, so rushed as fast as I could every time. Nafisa had not chosen this. She couldn't make her own choices and my weakness was hurting her. Yet I had no power to change. I wished she could go on playdates like other children in her class did. She was invited to birthdays but I wasn't allowed to take her. I watched her world shrinking until it was almost as small as mine.

The flat had no internal doors or heating and was simply two rooms, a kitchenette and a tiny grey bathroom. There wasn't a shower and just one living room stroke bedroom with two frayed, blue, velvet sofa-beds that doubled up at night. The stairs from the shop leading upstairs weren't enclosed. Anyone could run up and be in our sitting area before I could make myself decent. It never felt safe. It was a shelter but never a home.

Emma was my best friend from school. She always had banter with Ali for my sake and he turned on the charm when she came to see me at the shop. He could be nice, just not to me. He wanted to impress her. Emma was attractive, clever and creative. She lived in Didsbury. Her parents were teachers and I used to join them for Sunday lunch when I was at school. I always loved Emma's father, Mr Elliot. He drove a red Lada and sometimes dropped me home after Sunday lunches. They always made me salmon because I was Muslim and couldn't eat the roast chicken or beef they were having, so I ate salmon with Yorkshire pudding and gravy which looking back is pretty weird.

Jessie Jeffrey

Jessie Jeffrey was born in Connecticut, raised in Wales and lives in Manchester. She feels lost a lot. Following her BA in English and Creative Writing at Royal Holloway, Jessie began work on her first novel, which explores the fallout of a mother's unusual way of dealing with grief. She's interested in messy characters and why people make mistakes. During writing breaks, Jessie tries her best to remember she's made tea before it goes cold, and takes long walks to sadly contemplate the fact that, since she's moved out of her mother's house, she doesn't technically own a dog anymore.

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The Reborners

Abigail's bedroom was at the end of the upstairs corridor, past all the other rooms. The novelty of being home for the first time in months, combined with exhaustion, made her move slowly. Not much had changed; Abigail noted each familiarity with some satisfaction. Nothing had broken apart in her absence. The carpet by the staircase had grown a little more unpeeled since she was last home, exposing a larger triangle of wood. The paint was still chipped on the bathroom door; Helen's door still had her name stuck on it. Her mother's door was propped slightly open, exposing a few inches of darkness.

Abigail wasn't sure why she stopped there at first; she couldn't see it, not yet. Only the darkness was unusual – it was still light outside, the evening sunlight falling onto the hallway carpet and warming her feet. The unexpected black in her mother's room made Abigail a little uneasy, enough to stop and peer through the gap. At first, she couldn't really see inside. She waited a moment for her eyes to adjust, then noticed the bulky shadow, its muted colours – white, brown, blue. She pushed the door open, listening to it brush against the carpet, unsure why her insides felt so suddenly heavy.

The curtains were drawn. Her mother's bed was made, the duvet tucked neatly into the side – it didn't look as though she was still sleeping sporadically through the day. The room was neat and orderly. The floor had been hoovered recently, there were no dirty clothes strewn over the chairs or the floor, no clutter

on the dressing table. The cot was next to the window, its bars casting striped shadows on the curtains.

Abigail remembered the cot. It was the big pine one, the one her mother used when she and Helen were babies. The one that had been flat-packed in the attic until last June, when they spent an afternoon trying to screw the pieces together. She remembered that day, the rain splattering the windows and the laughter as they failed to understand the faded diagrams on the instructions.

It was up for almost two months before they moved it back to the attic.

And now it was here again, in the same place, with the blue blanket all bunched up at its foot. For a moment, Abigail was sick with hope.

There was a tiny shape at the head of the cot. Abigail moved towards it, digging her nails into her palms. She wasn't breathing, although she wasn't sure why.

There he was, impossibly, arms and legs curled up towards his chest, his tiny white jumpsuit still too loose.

He looked exactly the same. Abigail gripped the sides of the cot and stared. He was sleeping, eyes squeezed shut, expression almost determined, as if he had to concentrate. His hands and toes were coiled inwards, his faced pursed and pouty. A few strands of black hair clung to his forehead. In places, his skin seemed purplish – as if it were thin, delicate, but not bruised. He was too small, and completely still.

And it wasn't him, although it took Abigail a moment to realise what she was looking at. *It must have cost a small fortune*, she thought, then felt bad for thinking it. She reached out to touch the doll, but stopped herself. She didn't want to feel it. It would be awful if it felt real; it would be worse if it felt cold.

No one had told her. How long had he been there? No. Not him, Abigail told herself. *It*. The doll wasn't her brother, it wasn't Rhys, and if she didn't draw that line now then she would go mad. She wanted to go downstairs right then, to scream at Helen until she got some answers, but it was difficult to tear herself away. There were little blue veins in its forehead. Someone had painted patches of dry skin onto its scalp. Its eyes were bulbous, almost too big for its head. She hadn't expected to see him again. *It*, she reminded herself once more, but she stayed staring until pins and needles took hold of her left leg. A burst of canned laughter came from downstairs. Helen was below her, still watching telly, despite knowing full well that this was in the room upstairs.

Abigail shook her head, looked around. There was a baby monitor on the dresser; on the screen a green-grainy version of herself shifted next to the cot. Where was the other one? Did her mother have it? The thought of her mother peering at it whilst wandering around Tesco, of seeing Abigail crouched next to the cot, shocked her into standing up. She half-hobbled towards the door, wobbling as the feeling came back into her leg.

Abigail closed the door firmly behind her when she left, feeling the need for a solid barrier between her and the doll. She did it quietly, though she didn't need to. It wasn't as if the doll could wake up.

She marched downstairs, stood in the hallway of the living room. She noticed for the first time how heavy her breathing was.

There had been exercises – she'd taught them to herself, from some blog she found at university, for when things got particularly bad. One hand on the stomach. Exhale first, slowly. Then inhale. Exhale again. Let your shoulders loosen, your fists unclench. Focus on breathing until your head has cleared. When she felt steady again she walked into the living room, stared at Helen until she looked up.

'Are you already done unpacking?' Helen asked, and Abigail felt a fresh wave of irritation.

'What's in Mum's room?'

Helen tensed up, just for a moment, the movement coming across almost as a shudder. She kept her eyes on her book, her nails scrabbling against the fibres of the armchair.

'I saw it,' Abigail said. 'Just now.'

Helen didn't answer. She wasn't looking up. She was breathing very slowly and steadily – Abigail could see each movement of her chest.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I didn't know how?' Helen's voice was quiet. 'I thought you wouldn't like it.'

Well, obviously, Abigail was about to begin, but she stopped herself. She watched Helen make little circles on the carpet with the toe of her sock and felt annoyed again. It seemed unfair that her sister got to act like the uncertain one, when she had known about this for God-only-knew-how-long and Abigail had only just found out.

'What about the doctor?' Abigail asked, forcing her voice into a more neutral tone. 'What did he say?'

'I don't know. I don't know if she's told him. She goes in alone.'

'She clearly has to, though! It's – ' She paused, her hand in the air, vainly trying to emphasise some unknown point. 'Don't you think it's a little unhealthy? How long has this been going on for?'

'About...maybe a month?' Helen shifted in her seat, closed her textbook. 'It's weird. But she seems better, Abby. It like...changed something.'

What had changed, Abigail thought, was that her mother had finally and completely lost her mind. She didn't say this. She turned around, still annoyed, and left the room.

'I'll actually unpack now,' she told Helen as she went, although everything good about being home seemed to have faded entirely.

Usually Abigail found it hard to stop unpacking once she had started; it turned her room into such a mess that it was difficult to think straight until the job was done. Tonight she felt listless and distracted. When her mother returned from the shops, Abigail was still sitting on her bed, twisting the arm of one of her jumpers. She looked up to see her mother leaning on the doorframe, watching her. Abigail wondered how long she'd been there.

'Here, I'll help.' Her mother took the jumper from her, folded it neatly. Helen had told her, around February, that their mother had been easing herself back into work doing part-time at Next. She could fold clothes the way shop assistants did, now, with the arms tucked neatly behind the chest. Abigail would never be able to replicate it.

'Where do you want it to go?' her mother was opening a drawer. 'I know you have a special system.'

Usually the jumper wouldn't go in a drawer at all – it belonged on the middle-left hand side of her wardrobe, where her bulkier layers were. She considered explaining this to her mother, decided against it. It had already been folded so nicely.

Anyway, there was only one thing she wanted to talk to her mother about, although she was struggling to find a way to bring it up.

'Anywhere's fine,' Abigail said, pulling a pair of jeans from her case. 'I'm just glad for the help.'

Later that night, unable to sleep, Abigail stared at her wardrobe, re-organising it in her head. She tried to make herself lie still, told herself it didn't matter. They were just clothes. Her mother hadn't crumpled them; nothing would happen if they were left out of order for a while. She managed it for almost an hour, just lying with the discomfort. Then she stood up and moved everything to its right place. It was too difficult, otherwise, knowing things were all jumbled up and wrong.

Shirley-Anne Kennedy

Shirley-Anne Kennedy has a BA (Hons) in Creative Writing from the University of Bolton where she graduated with First Class Honours and the Carcanet Press Award. In 2017 she took part in New Writing North's Significant Ink Professional Development programme. She is a former co-organiser of Kultura, a monthly poetry lecture and open mic night in Todmorden and Write Out Loud in Middleton, Manchester. With a background in public relations, community engagement and social media she often supports community groups to produce creative writing projects, sometimes involving live events, music, performance and traditional and digital publishing.

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Always On My Mind

At the undertakers
when the door rattled,
I knew it was dad
demanding a cheap coffin.

I ignored him when he said
at that price he would prefer
to be hung on the washing line
and let the birds do the work.

He insisted both metal hips
should be weighed-in,
they wouldn't be any use
where he was going.

I told him, forget it,
he was being cremated.
But I did what he said
when it came to the wake.

He's forever telling me
I need to get a grip,
now he's started on the kids
who've had enough of him

switching off the lights,
moaning on about Brexit
and the rising cost of living.
It's their life they say.

I told him he's joking
if he thinks he can
tell me what to do
at my age. I know

my own mind.
About time he says;
he has better things
to be getting on with.

Leave 1969

We're travelling in my father's Morris Oxford
its bonnet as mirrored as the Japan work
on my grandmother's sewing machine.

My only allies on this journey north
are the rear oxblood leather seats,
and an armrest as wide as Hadrian's Wall.

My mother attempts to navigate,
she's no good at it, she never will be;
still she tries knowing my father will lose

his patience when he takes a wrong turn,
the one which will end his efforts to become
a civilian for the duration of the holiday.

We all know it's coming.
I can't look at a sat-nav now without
thinking of the peace it may have won.

It won't be long before we stop at the pub.
My dad will need a Jimmy Riddle, my mum
will need to calm her nerves. I will remain

in the car and reach for *The Virgin Soldiers*,
a paperback my father keeps stashed
in the car's glove compartment.

I know I'm too young to be reading it.
I know my dad shouldn't hit the bottle
or the man who's going to look at him

the wrong way in the toilets. I know
my mother shouldn't be crying and when
they get back it's best to pretend I'm sleeping.

*

Bad Moon Rising

I had not expected to see him, painted in oils and displayed on a wall, between a depiction of the fierce fighting at Goose Green and a jeep racing through a desert god-knows-where. But there he was. I recognised him of course, eyes never change, the artist had caught them perfectly. It was the name which had thrown me: Sergeant David Johnston. Real names had escaped us. We never had any use for them. To me he was Jock. His smile as wide as my own when we ran through fields or crawled on our bellies through a maze of tunnels on an abandoned assault course.

Jock and I were children when we first met, members of a gang who identified one another by our fathers' nicknames. We were Jock, Geordie, Sandy, Horse and often Crazy. Some of our mothers were once natives of exotic lands. Our own territory had been a no-man's land on the perimeter of a British military camp which was itself hemmed in by barbed-wire fences and scattered with anonymous Nissen huts. Our imaginations knew no limits. We used them to keep our enemies at bay.

Our daily lives were littered with precautions. These included a network of shared behaviours that remain, for the most part, unknown to those outside of our inner circle. We knew never to question our parents when they spoke in whispers. And members of our gang disappeared. When they did, we raced en-masse to the quarters of the missing where we witnessed their belongings leaving in tea chests. Though we never knew whose turn it would be next, we all knew our own was coming.

People rarely said goodbye to us in those days. The ones who did were not our fathers, though they were always in the process of leaving. Most returned. I kept a continual look-out for mine. There were times when he appeared as if by magic, bergen bouncing on his back, an overseas tan evident. There was always something missing though, some part of him he had left behind. Wherever that was.

Jock and I both lived in quarters which were decorated with touristy knick-knacks from overseas countries. Though Jock tended to stay at mine most of the time.

Our families boycotted Vesta meals and dined in Chinese and Indian restaurants long before they became mainstream. Family holidays were spent secluded in Wales or visiting family somewhere. My father could get by in several languages while I could swear proficiently in Malay before I was five. My mother slept in Chinese silk pyjamas. Several beautiful yet unworn Cheongsam dresses hung in her wardrobe.

The canopy of our world was laced with metal birds, their soothing thump-thump rotors a comfort. It was only the visitors who found them unnerving.

Visitors like my paternal grandmother who barricaded herself in woolly cardigans reinforced with the scent of African violets. And my mother's brothers, whose deep-pie Lancashire accents were reminiscent of a single record being played at 33.33 rpm. They were what my father termed as flower people and dressed from head to toe in the latest civilian fashion accessorised with laughter. My mother grew markedly livelier in their presence and my father grumpier.

One of my uncles was John Lennon in disguise. Well, that is what he told me and I believed him. I let our gang in on the secret. Uncle John requested we kept his true identity confidential due to the resulting chaos should fans discover his presence amongst us. We swore an oath the information was safe. Which it was. Despite the best efforts of Jock and myself we were unable to find anyone willing to pay us for it.

My father would not have approved of our attempted double-cross. Well, part of him would, the part which approved of using one's own initiative. The part of him that believed in honour and loyalty would be sure to disapprove. No matter how hard anyone tried it was impossible to win our father's full approval. Whatever we did, and however well we did it, we were always expected to go a little further. Anything else was unacceptable.

It was probably not a bad thing then that our fathers were absent most of the time. Our mothers found ways to fill the space. Jock's mother turned to drink and developed a bad case of nerves. My mother tuned into the radio. We listened to *Woman's Hour*, *The Archers*, *The Shipping Forecast* and the 33.33 rpm voices of *The Jimmy Clitheroe Show*. Hippy-happy music insulated any gaps.

In the evenings when my father was home, and my parents' attendance was required at formal events, my mother wore taffetas and devoré accessorised with pearls. And on occasion, a lush fur coat which had been a gift from my father. Though his gesture was appreciated she never took any pleasure in the coat. The cruelty of fur appalled her. Before they left for the evening my mother would kiss me goodbye, her presence lingering over me like an angelic mobile of red lipstick and face powder. I petted the coat and shared her sadness at its existence.

Unlike Jock's mother my own was not one to be preoccupied with sadness, she believed life was too short to warrant it. Sadness was something to be scheduled away with organised visits to friends, parks, museums and art galleries. We took lengthy walks along the riverbank, shopped at the NAAFI and ate ice-cream sundaes in cafés with jukeboxes. Jock always accompanied us on these outings.

Once a week Jock and I visited the local cathedral with my mother. The cathedral was my idea of heaven then with its jewelled windows, stone knights, incense and the soundtrack of rhythmic footsteps upon flagstones. I savoured every inch of space, soaking in the ruby candlelight and the whispers of dead monks gossiping in the cloister. The ancient chains of the books rattled as Jock and I flew past. Their centuries old deposits of dust and damp cloaking us as

we hummed along with the dirge of the organ. Our regimental colours stood proudly in one of the chapels secluded off the main aisle. Jock and I would stand to attention to salute them

Thomas D. Lee

Thomas D Lee is a Victorian polar explorer who was frozen in the ice in 1847 and thawed out in contemporary England. He writes to dull the painful memories of his long-dead loved ones. Having worked as a professional copywriter, Tom now lives in Manchester as a writer and high school teaching assistant. He is plugging away at a satirical fantasy novel, *The Matter of Britain*, which drags the Arthurian myths kicking and screaming into an exaggerated post-Brexit dystopia. He is terrified of global warming, believes in the redistribution of wealth, and enjoys Bourbon biscuits.

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Extract from *The Matter of Britain*

Kay crawls up from under his hill, up through the claggy earth.

For the last thousand years or more, the land around his hill has been dry. He remembers. Drainage and farming and modern miracles kept the water away. Now the ground is wet and waterlogged, like it used to be in the old days, before the fens were drained. He wonders why.

It's easier to crawl up through wet earth than it is when it's dry or frozen, but it has its own challenges. The slippery nature of it. Harder to get purchase. He burrows through clay, grabs at roots, getting his head out first and then an elbow, before taking a break to catch his breath. The sun is baking hot. It must be midsummer.

He has another go at it. The earth's pulling down on him, but the mud slickens his maille and provides some lubrication. There's an almighty squelch. He feels the earth let go. His leg comes free. His hips get past the roots. When he's out to his knees he almost slips, falls back into the strange orifice that he's climbed out of, but he manages to stop himself. He gets his shins above ground, and then he's up. Kneeling in the sun, panting in the heat. Wearing a coat of maille and a green cloak, both rimed with muddy afterbirth. His dreadlocks are matted with filth.

Sure enough, when he looks around, he finds that his little burial hill is surrounded by a kind of bog. The waters have risen. This is how it was when he was buried, before the tree grew from his stomach.

It doesn't look like there's anyone here to wake him up, this time. In the old days there were bands of horsemen, sometimes even a king in person when the need was dire. Then it became army lorries, or circles of druids in white shifts, slightly surprised that their dancing had actually achieved something. More recently, a man in a raincoat, checking his wristwatch, with a flying machine roaring on the grass behind him. Nothing today. It must be one of the more organic ones, where the earth itself decides to shake his shoulder. Something shifting in the spirit of the realm. Or maybe the birds in the sky have held a parliament and voted to dig him up. He looks around. No sign of any birds, either.

"Bad, then," he mutters, to nobody.

He drags himself to his feet. First thing to do is to find his sword and shield. They usually get regurgitated somewhere nearby, though there's not an exact science to it. He's not sure that the earth fully understands its obligations. The covenant with Merlin was fairly specific. *Make this knight whole again and surrender him back to the realm of the living, whenever England is in peril. Return him with his sword and shield and other tools of war, untarnished. If he should fall then consume him once more and remake him whole. When peril is bested, let him return to your bosom and sleep, until peril calls him forth again.* It couldn't have been much clearer. But mud is mud. Mud generally struggles with written instructions. There were bound to be some misunderstandings.

There's something very new across the bog. He squints at it, because the sun is bright and reflecting off the metal parts. An ugly cluster of low buildings, with pipes running everywhere like a mass of serpents. In the centre is a great big tall thing like an iron skeleton, bigger than Camelot.

"Didn't used to be there," he says, to himself.

It seems like a good place to start, if he's going to figure out why he's back. But he has to find his sword first. He heads down the hill, and the earth squelches underfoot. Is his sword in the bog, somewhere? Hopefully he'll just stumble onto it. That's usually how this works, the various ancient forces of the realm conspiring to make things easier for him. That was always one of the perks of being in Arthur's posse. How else would idiots like Bors and Galahad have achieved anything, if they hadn't had assistance from white hinds and talking rivers, guiding them on their way? Not that they ever showed any gratitude.

It's funny how whoever built this thing built it so close to his hill. But that's just another acorn from the same tree. It's no more or less funny than white hinds or talking rivers. Riding through the old forests, you could never shake the feeling that there was a quest around the corner, put there for them to find by some greater power, whether that power was the Christ King or the Saxon gods or some older goddess of the fields. Arthur never seemed to notice. It seemed natural to him that things of import should occur in his proximity. If anyone else noticed they knew better than to mention it. Only Kay would bring it up

occasionally and earn himself a scowl from Merlin or a jibe from Lancelot.

There's a thought to make him angry. Lancelot on his white horse, sneering. Whispering in Arthur's ear. *Look, sire, a brown Nubian covered in brown filth, and no browner for it. Wallowing in a bog like his parents.* He imagines Lancelot in the distance, goading him. He imagines pulling Lancelot down from his horse and drowning him in the mud. It's a good thought for fuelling you through a bog.

The mud isn't so bad, at first. He wades through it with barely a grimace. It's no worse than Agincourt, or the Somme. At least there's no bullets flying, no hot shell fragments raining down or French coursers charging at him. The only problem is the maille, which weighs him down. And Christ, it's a hot day. Summers never used to be this hot, he's sure of it. It's a day for resting in the shade, not wearing maille or wading through bogs. If it gets any thicker he'll be right back underground again, slowly choking, lungs filling with mud. And what would happen then? He's died in forty different ways over the years, from Saxon spearheads and Byzantine fire and Japanese inhospitality, but he's never drowned in mud before. That would be a new one to add to the list.

He can't help but notice that there's something odd about this mud. It has a slickness to it, a purple sheen, that reflects the sunlight more than mud really ought to. He's up to his knees in it, now. No sword yet. He casts his eyes around, throws up his hands in hopelessness.

"Nimue?" he asks. It's worth a shot. "Nimue! Bit of help, maybe?"

No answer. No pale arm shoots skywards from the oily waters, holding aloft a gleaming sword. That only works for Caliburn, apparently. Not common swords like his that actually soil themselves with blood now and again.

It's made him careless, coming back from the dead. He'd never have walked blithely across a moor, in the old days. Suicide. He's used to being pampered now, lorries and flying machines and warm beds to sleep in whenever he's above ground. He's forgotten the basics. If he does drown in this bog then it will be his own fault and no-one else's. No wonder Nimue isn't helping. She's probably got more important things to do, in another lake somewhere. More important than helping errant knights find their bloody swords.

He's thinking of wading back when a sound breaks out across the moor, a modern sound. There's still a part of his mind that thinks of old-fashioned explanations before it thinks of modern ones. It must be a beast that needs slaying, or else a kind of signal horn that he's never heard before. But no, it's a klaxon, a warning siren. Coming from the mass of buildings. That piques his interest. If it sounds like peril, it's probably peril. Onwards, then. Through the mud and heat.

After five minutes of trudging he reaches a wire fence. Without his sword there's not much chance of cutting through it. There are some signs on the fence which he reads out slowly, sounding out the words with dry lips. The first sign says **SECURE FRACKING FACILITY**. Kay thinks he knows what that word

‘fracking’ might mean, but they didn’t have secure facilities for it the last time he was up and about. Times change. The second sign is more interesting. It says, THIS SITE IS PROTECTED BY VIKINGS. There’s a sort of red heraldry of a nasal helmet, with the kind of horns that vikings never used to have. In the corner of the notice are the words VIKING PMC. *Protection you can rely on.*

“No bloody wonder, then,” he says, to himself.

He likes this sign. It has explained his purpose to him. If the vikings are back, that must be why he is back. An invader has overrun England’s shores. Classic peril. If there are any vikings protecting this place, he will find the vikings, and he will kill them.

First, he must pass the fence. He has climbed the walls of Antioch and stormed the beaches of Normandy, so a wire fence shouldn’t pose much difficulty. Surely. Even if it is buzzing strangely.

He reaches out to climb it. Wraps his fingers around a link in the fence.

He’s never been electrocuted before. Crushed, yes, and covered in burning oil, and carried off his horse by a nine-pound gunstone. Never electrocuted. This is new. The pain rips through him like the raw fury of God. Like a thousand hornet stings. He feels his flesh begin to sizzle. He smells it cooking. His maille glows red. He cannot let go of the fence, because his muscles are clenched firmly, and his hands will not obey him. Until finally his blackened fingers unhook themselves, and his carcass falls back smouldering into the wet mud.

Death feels like God snapping his fingers. It’s always the same. The old sorcery flies out of him like a raven bursting free of a pie, and the spell is broken. His bones remember their age and turn accordingly to dust.

There is always the briefest of moments, while his skin is still curling into parchment, when he can feel the morbid wrongness of it. Like opening a musty tomb and seeing the shrivelled thing inside of it and knowing that he is trespassing somewhere haunted. Except that the shrivelled thing is him. He is a living fossil, and then he is nothing, grains of sand in the wind, a putrid smell lost in the many bad smells of war.

Then it gets worse. The covenant says that when he’s done saving the realm he can ‘return to slumber’. It’s not a restful slumber. He is not sleeping peacefully under the tree, cradled by God, until England needs him. He is somewhere else, somewhere dark. Falling. It feels like falling out of bed, but with the certain knowledge that there’s no floor to fall onto. Only a wide chasm, with some dark intelligence at the bottom that is patiently awaiting his arrival. And this is where time punishes him for his hubris. It makes itself meaningless, and leaves him without a solid yardstick in the darkness. How long is he there? He can never tell. Moments or millennia. He wakes from hours of falling and finds that he has actually only been falling for eight seconds, or so. He screams for twenty years and then loses the thread of time and has to start all over again.

And then he wakes up under his tree, usually screaming. Made whole again by the earth. Not knowing how long it's been since the last time he died. It's a joke, talking about slumber. He wonders if Merlin knew, when he made the covenant. How horrible it would be.

There's a period of uncertainty. Is he flesh again, or is he still putrid clay, a brownish cludge of his own corruption, recongealing? He opens his eyes, wriggles his fingers, feels his leg and shoulder remade, the bone and tissue knitted back together. Then he climbs up out of the soil again, scrambling, more quickly this time, writhing like a worm, elbowing his way towards the light. His maille is repaired. How can the earth remake a coat of maille? How can it remake him? Questions that will never be answered. It doesn't bear thinking about.

He gets his head and shoulders above the ground. It's still a hot day. Whether it's the same hot day is a different question. Years may have passed.

But they haven't. He can hear the sirens in the distance, across the bog. Good. He's not lost any time. He might still be able to kill some vikings after all.

He gets up and wades back through the bog again, looking for his sword and shield.

Pippin Eira Major

Pippin Eira Major grew up amongst sheep and other small herbivores in North Wales. With a shortage of human contact, they developed an overactive imagination and a need to create strong, emotive characters embroiled in exciting scenarios. They write speculative and literary fiction which aims to tackle modern issues and is particularly interested in crafting complex LGBTQ+ characters. Pippin is also the sole member of grunge-pop group Maybe Wednesday. This submission is from an on-going weird fantasy novel about death, dragons, gender roles and how an economy can devastate an entire eco-system.



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The Architects of Everything

The night mists on the mountains were warm and thick against Aleatha's skin. She could hear things moving in the hidden trees around her, crickets singing their tuneless songs. She brushed her hands along the heavy heads of purple flowers growing as high as her waist, the chill of their fat berries knocking into her calves. Her sharp eyes were useless in the murk, but she wasn't afraid. The velvety darkness was as familiar as the wet heat against her skin, the few beads of sweat on her back.

Across the lake, she just barely glimpsed the red flash of a toka-bird as it dived, almost pummelling right into the damp earth. In the last instant before it hit, it's spread the scale-feathers of its wings wide. She heard the last squeak of its prey as it took off again and disappeared into the trees and the mist.

Aleatha's toes stirred the edge of the water. She waded in up to her waist, her tunic getting heavy with it. In the daylight, the lake was green and shimmering, but at night it was as dark and black as the sky. When she was younger, she would have stripped bare. When she bathed with others during the day, she still would. It was different at night, though, when she came to meet Mirame. It had been different for some time. Aleatha twirled her hand along the surface of the water and then dipped below the surface, her hair fanning around her. She held her breath until her lungs started to scream in her chest, then she breached the water with a gasp.

‘Did you get bored of waiting for me?’ a playful voice asked from the shore. The mist was not hanging low enough that it hid Mirame completely. Aleatha could just make out the lines of her legs as she climbed into the lake, then her knees, the front of her tunic, and finally her face. She was smiling, her eyes bright as stars. Aleatha smiled back at her.

‘You know I don’t like hanging around.’

Mirame flicked water at Aleatha’s face and they both laughed. ‘I had to wait for my father to fall asleep.’

Aleatha splashed her back.

‘How rude,’ Mirame said. She rolled in the water so she could lay flat on its surface. ‘The mist is thick tonight.’

Aleatha rolled her eyes. ‘You always say that.’

‘And you always say *that*,’ Mirame jibed. Aleatha knocked into Mirame’s foot so she plopped under the water surface again. ‘Hey!’ she yelled when she emerged. Aleatha laughed and dipped back under again, swimming out faster than Mirame could follow. ‘You’re dead when I get my hands on you!’

Aleatha shook her head. ‘You’ll have to catch me first!’ she called, and she dived again.

‘Aleatha, wait!’ she called after her. Aleatha just laughed and picked the pace up. ‘Alea!’ Mirame said. Something about her tone made Aleatha stop and turn. Mirame was quite a few feet away. They were both too far out into the lake to stand on the bottom now, heads and shoulders bobbing as they swirled their limbs to stay afloat.

‘What’s wrong?’ Aleatha said. Mirame sighed. She swam her gentle stroke to breach the distance, and Aleatha didn’t dart off again, although she did consider it.

‘Don’t go off like that tonight. I don’t want to play like children,’ Mirame said. The words stung, but Aleatha pretended they didn’t.

Aleatha reached for Mirame through the water, fingers nudging at her wrist until she laced their hands together. ‘What is it?’ Aleatha asked.

‘I’m afraid.’

‘Of the water?’ Aleatha asked, with a grin. Mirame didn’t laugh. They had played together in the lake for years. Mirame might not have been as quick as Aleatha, but she was just as skilled as a swimmer. Aleatha had heard in stories about how lakes in far off lands were filled with slimy, scaled beasts, but nothing grew or lived in the lake. In the midday sun, toka-birds would dip into it to wash their scale-feathers, but aside from that, it was used only by the people of Dyry, to bathe and wash their clothes.

Tomorrow the villages would be hung with colours for the festival. When they were children, Aleatha and Mirame had run after the parade, hands clasped like they were beneath the water. They wore purple flowers in their hair and sipped

wine from the cups of indulgent adults. Aleatha was the ward of the Watcher, her stoic aunt Kisa, and so the two of them could get away with anything if they smiled right. Mirame was the youngest of her father's six daughters, barely noticed and allowed to tear around the streets if she so wished. Aleatha remembered feeling larger then, as though she could conquer the world.

'Did you speak with your father?' Aleatha asked.

Mirame sank a little deeper into the water so just her eyes peered over the surface.

'He didn't say he was going to present you, did he?' Aleatha demanded.

Mirame disappeared entirely for a moment and resurfaced closer than before. 'I didn't speak to him at all,' she said.

The words rippled across the lake, heavy like a stone.

'He said last festival you'd have another summer, and the same the festival before. Maybe he'll never present you at all,' said Aleatha, but her stomach fluttered. Mirame might not have been worthy of a title, but she was beautiful. Any man would be lucky to have her as a wife, and any father would be a fool not to present her soon, before that beauty began to spoil. It all felt far away in that moment, cloaked by the mist. Aleatha was bolder there, and she twisted her hand out of Mirame's grip and trailed it up to lie against her cheek.

Mirame was bolder too. She didn't flinch away when she spoke again.

'My father is old, now...'

Aleatha smoothed her cheek. 'He has your sisters' husbands to light his candles for him. He doesn't need another.'

'It's not right for him to still look after me.'

'Mira,' Aleatha sighed. 'You care for him at least as much as he cares for you. Who cooked your feast-givings?'

'That's not the point, and you know it,' Mirame grumbled.

'You're as good as head of your house. He'd be lost without you. He'd be a fool to send you off like that. When are you going to find time to mend his clothes when you're making new ones for babies?' Aleatha asked.

'Stop it,' Mirame whispered. She closed her eyes. She turned in the water and began to swim to the shore.

'Where are you going?' Aleatha called after her.

'I don't know,' Mirame replied. Aleatha watched her climb out of the water and sit on the edge. She curled her knees up against her chest and looked away, across the flickering water.

They used to dress in their mother's old clothes by the lake and pretend every week was festival week. Mirame would stand at the edge of the water with a handful of Corina roses and Aleatha would declare her name and shout into the trees, asking if anyone would claim her. The only answer would be toka-bird caws and cricket croaks, and they would dive into the pool and laugh and shout

until they tired themselves out enough to lie in the roses and look up through the gaps in the trees.

‘Do you remember when we were little, and we used to talk about which of the boys would be our husbands?’ said Mirame.

Aleatha smiled. ‘You always liked Gerat.’

‘The shame of it,’ said Mirame. ‘I was so jealous of you when he asked you for your hand that festival.’

Aleatha smiled wryly, remembering the horror on Gerat’s face as he was marched before Merioch, the head of the village, and forced to renounce his claim. ‘He’s as thick as tree and bright as a post.’

‘You howled about it for weeks,’ Mirame said.

‘I did not,’ Aleatha protested. Mirame raised an eyebrow. Aleatha sighed. ‘Okay, maybe I howled for a few days. You cried at least as much as I did. I got over it.’

‘You did. And so did I,’ said Mirame, her voice quiet again. Aleatha’s gaze traced the edge of her nose, the outline of her lips. Her jaw sloped so elegantly to join with her neck. ‘Promise me something,’ Mirame whispered.

‘What?’

Mirame held out her hand for Aleatha to take. ‘If it happens tomorrow, promise me we’ll still meet like this, always?’

Aleatha clutched Mirame’s fingers. ‘I promise.’

Matthew McGrogan

Matthew McGrogan is a history graduate from Manchester. He mostly writes in the sci-fi genre, and is currently working on a sci-fi thriller novel, *Sentinel*. When he isn't writing, he teaches chess at local schools and plays at his local club.

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Sentinel PROLOGUE

Ed woke to the sound of birds. It was still dark outside; frost lined the edges of the window beside his bed. He heard rain, soft against the flat roof of the house. It dripped down through the branches of the tree outside, and made Ed all the more reluctant to get out of bed. How different it would be to wake up in the city. The sound of the factories had been inescapable the last time he had visited the Institute.

A passing train disturbed the birds and brought Ed round fully. He became aware of his father's muffled voice. He couldn't usually hear anything through the door. He kicked off the duvet and sat up, and as he did so, the wall in front of him came to life.

'Good Morning, Edrodin. You have one reminder set for today: Speech. Importance: Urgent. Location: The Institute.'

The voice was far too enthusiastic and to-the-point at this time in the morning to belong to a human — and today especially Ed had no patience for it. He still wasn't quite sure how to interact with the system his dad had installed. It didn't seem to respond to what Ed said. He had tried several times to make it say "Dad" instead of "Stagent", but it never worked. The new technology at the Institute was far more impressive. Or so Ed hoped, as even close family hadn't been made aware of the specifics of the announcement. It had to be more impressive than this, though. Before he had time to clear the sleep from his eyes, the voice continued.

'Stagent, Kenzo, and Athena are present in the kitchen. Would you like me to notify them that you are awake?'

'No, no,' Ed said, then hesitated a moment. 'Thanks,' he added. What were they doing here this morning? They had been preparing for today for months.

Ed also wondered why Matige wasn't there — he was the head technician on all of his father's projects. If they were having a last minute meeting before the speech it would make sense to have all of them there. He was disappointed, really. Matige was the one who Ed always tried to impress the most on the few occasions his father showed him around the workshops.

Ed walked over to the wardrobe and picked out his smart clothes. The jacket felt loose around his shoulders, and the shoes dug into his heels, but Ed thought he looked respectable. He needed to make a good impression today. He sighed, took a deep breath, and walked over to the door. It slid open without a sound, and the once muffled voices became clear.

'Oh it was nothing, Ken. We sorted it out last night, once you'd left. It's hardly the biggest argument the three of us have ever had, is it?' *Dad sounds stressed*, Ed thought. He hovered on the landing, unsure as to why he was trying to be quiet. His dad hadn't mentioned any argument last night.

'No, it's not, but it does sound serious,' Athena said. She sounded calm, as always.

'Serious enough to postpone the announcement?' said his dad.

'I'm not saying we should postpone it, you know that,' Kenzo said. Ed heard him put down a mug with some force on the table before he continued. 'I'm just saying we should make sure we're all on the same page.'

'Matige is a control freak. We've known that for years. He has to learn to compromise.' His dad paused. '-and he has to learn that my word is final.'

'And you think he's going to do that after yesterday?'

'He said as much. Stop worrying about him, anyway. He wants it as much as we do,' his dad said, regaining his usual authority. 'Besides, we should be worrying about convincing the people, not each other.'

'Fine. We should still head over early, though. He'll be there by now. It'll set both of our minds at ease,' said Kenzo.

'Fine, we'll get going.'

Chairs scraped against the floor. It was hardly a celebratory atmosphere, Ed thought. He was just about to go downstairs and say farewell to his dad when Athena spoke.

'What about Ed?'

'Take him with you in a few hours.' Ed's father sighed. 'Kenzo's right, we'd better go and talk to Matige before this all gets started.'

Ed had known something would come up to prevent him from being involved properly today. He was ready, his dad just didn't believe it yet. Ed heard the front door open.

'Athena,' his dad began. There was a moment of silence. 'Give this to Ed when he wakes up. I'd rather him have it than me, today.' Ed heard metal clink as his Dad put something down, and then the house shook as the door shut.

Ed waited on the landing for what he thought was a couple of minutes, letting the conversation sink in. It had done nothing to settle the nerves that had been rising in his stomach for weeks. He tried to look inconspicuous as he walked downstairs.

'Morning, Ed,' Athena said.

'Morning.'

'Your dad has made you breakfast.' There was a plate on the table. Ed wasn't looking at that, though. He was looking at his mother's locket. Surely that wasn't what his dad wanted to give to him.

'Yeah, right,' he mumbled, and sat down.

'Ed,' Athena began. Ed felt his cheeks go red as she looked at him. 'Did you... hear what we were talking about before?' Ed couldn't match her unfaltering gaze.

'Yeah,' he said. He couldn't lie to her. 'Sorry — I just woke up and — what's going on?'

'My son is just a worrier, Ed. It'll be fine, nothing for you to worry about.'

Ed knew when he was being left out. He walked over to the locket and picked it up, turning it over in his hand and resisting the urge to open it. 'What's this here for?'

'Your dad wanted you to have it.'

'Why?' He wanted to say he'd never known his father to go anywhere without it, but he didn't. It made him even more nervous.

'I don't know,' she said. She stood up, and continued. 'Come on, eat your breakfast. We don't want to be late.'

Alex Peilober-Richardson

Alex Peilober-Richardson was stolen by fairies, and the changeling left in her place has tried her best to assimilate since. She has been telling stories since she could talk and illustrating them since she could hold a pencil. She primarily writes speculative fiction but has been known to dabble in literary, with a focus on characters who ask too many questions. Her submission is taken from a fantasy novel about a girl on a quest to save her sister, which questions the simplicity of fairy tales and explores the impact of late-stage capitalism upon the environment.



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An extract from the beginning of a novel; Rowan has left her village and travelled to the giant's-skull city of Goligothia, searching for someone who can help her on her quest.

Rowan was waved through the jawbones of the giant and into the streets beyond.

Some sort of market was in full swing. It was unbearably loud, a rush of activity and music, deafening after the quiet of the woods. Someone behind her was waved in by the guard and pushed forward, and she nearly lost her footing. A scowl sprung to her lips, but the assailant had already vanished into the heaving crowd. No sense in chasing a shadow.

Now she was in the middle of it all, invisible within a sea of people, as unknown and mysterious and ordinary as any other passing stranger. Her mind clung to the name in the letter left by Clay; Lantern Keeper. All she needed to do was find the stall that sold lanterns and information, and be on her way. Quick and easy. It was this comfort, at the foremost of her thoughts, that propelled her through the crowd.

The first thing to hit her was the smell. There was food, yes, warm scents of roasting meat and baking bread, making her stomach growl and her nostrils burn. At least one stall was selling perfumes strong enough to make her eyes water, and another billowing purple-blue-grey incense that did battle with the clouds above. Beneath that, the hot stink of people and animals, sweat and shit that clung to passersby like beggar-children. Rowan wrinkled her nose before schooling her expression. If the Old Tales had taught her anything, it would not do to offend.

But then there were people yelling at her from the safety of their stalls, and this resolution grew difficult to uphold. They haggled and bartered and crowded at each other, each touting wares that promised to be better than the last.

‘Fresh fish! Herring, haddock, salmon of knowledge, mermaid, nixie—all fresh this morning!’

‘Poisons for sale,’ a snake-eyed woman smiled at Rowan. ‘Curare for your enemies, nightshade for your lovers, hemlock for your family. Come buy.’

‘Hearts, young miss, hearts! Roasted, minced, sliced, fried, whole! Fresh and beating! Young hearts, old hearts, hearts in love and broken! Trade yours in and get two in return!’

Rowan walked by each one, caught between revulsion and fascination. If she had the luxury of time, she would have liked to wander the market with the fresh, wide eyes it deserved, visiting each stall, bartering her belongings, getting what she wanted while losing what she had. But time was not her ally.

The most she could do was pause by a food stall, exchanging a handful of berries—the final gift from her village’s boundary—for a small loaf of bread and a hunk of cheese. Both were wrapped in a scrap of colourful cloth by a creature swaddled in dripping weeds. It had strange webbed fingers and matted hair that hid its face and it made no attempt at conversation. The only sound it made was heavy, humid breathing from half-flooded lungs. Rowan nodded her thanks, holding her breath and counting to ten in her head as she walked away to keep herself from looking back; a trick she learnt from the Old Tales. Whether it worked or not she didn’t know. But the drowned thing stayed safe behind its stall, and Rowan strode on.

By nightfall, she was exhausted and angry. The city was a maze of caverns where buildings were honeycombed into the bone, worm gnawed wooden pillars propping up an immense molar transformed into a tavern. Rowan avoided the cavity, stepping around the sickly light and sounds of merrymaking seeping from the open doors.

Night descended upon Goligotha with the same hurried frenzy as every other activity in the city; night-lamps were brought out to light the way, great flaming braziers propped up in every corner manned by creatures with dimly glowing eyes and too many teeth, roasting meats that had the suggestion of rats but the faces of children. She was offered a haunch but refused through gritted teeth.

Rowan cast her eyes upon the inhabitants of the city, watching their ways, cautious and curious. The darkness settling over the city drew stranger breeds of people, some unknown, others that Rowan thought she recognised perhaps from a dream. Solitary, tall entities that were only vaguely person-shaped, wrapped from head to toe in dusty cloth. A group of moon-pale creatures that murmured to each other as she passed, staring after with vacant eyes; shimmering, slight things that moved as if underwater, reaching out towards Rowan with gossamer

fingertips. Creatures who could have been hewn from the very earth itself, conversing with each other in a language that sounded like the crumbling of cliff faces. And others like Rowan, human or human-shaped, some clad in strange garments dyed colours Rowan thought impossible to dye, others wearing the pelts and hides of unfortunate creatures long slain, some in shining armour that Rowan had only seen in the illustrations to accompany the Old Tales. Some seemed to wear nothing aside from bright paint, and Rowan made a point of avoiding their wild eyes.

She passed stall after stall, her frustration growing with each step. Stalls that sold bottles stuffed with storms, localised lightning striking against flimsy glass; another selling gently glowing runestones that twisted in on themselves, spinning into oblivion as she walked by; yet another selling flowers that were carved from crystal; a stall laden with weapons unlike any she'd ever seen, great axes and swords and helms the size of cauldrons; more food, vast vats of stew that gleamed with all the dancing colours of a warped rainbow... But not one that sold lanterns, despite the presence of night-lamps at every window, stowed beneath every stall.

Rowan came to a stop by a sluggish fountain and fought the urge to scream. This was hopeless. Those inhabitants who weren't ignoring her outright now looked at her with curiosity, which only fanned the flames of her temper. Curiosity could be dangerous in a place like this. It was easier to find someone when you were no one.

One of the wispy creatures smiled her way, and Rowan felt her anger ebb, replaced by a contentedness unlike anything she had felt before. It coaxed her into relaxation, seeped into her bones and warmed them with a drowsy sweetness. Her lips curved upwards without her permission, into something that felt almost genuine. Rowan used to practise smiling at her reflection in the still waters of the village well, peering into the depths to see a strange face smiling back. She was convinced that if she learnt how to smile correctly, the people in the village wouldn't be scared of her, or stare after her with mistrustful eyes, or murmur words of disgust when they thought she couldn't hear. If she could just work out how to smile, perhaps she'd learn to like the face smiling back. The creature's smile made her think of that well, of the fear that her reflection would one day work out how to crawl out of its watery prison and replace her. Perhaps they'd like the reflection better. It seemed to know how to smile—

A hand closed over her shoulder, large fingertips digging into her flesh and dragging her out of whatever reverie she had fallen into. To her horror, she realised she was surrounded by the ethereal beasts, who all stared at the creature holding Rowan with moon-pale eyes, baleful and outraged. She was only a stumbling footstep away from tumbling into the fountain's depths. A voice rang out like a landslide.

‘This one is not for you. Leave her be.’

The misty creatures dispersed like smoke on the wind, the one to first smile at Rowan lingering for a scant moment longer. Now Rowan could see that smile for what it truly was—the slavering, ravenous grin of a predator denied its meal. She felt sick, and then angry. The hand of her saviour loosened enough for her to turn. One of the rock-creatures from earlier offered her a smile that she had no interest in returning.

‘Are you alright, miss? Looks like they nearly had you.’

‘I’m fine.’ She could hear bitterness seeping into her tone, hated how ungrateful it made her sound. She forced the words out between her teeth. ‘Thank you.’

‘It’s no problem. Can’t stand those things.’ Fingers formed from crumbling earth and rock loosened and dropped from her shoulder entirely, leaving smudges of blue chalk in their wake. She could move, now, watching the living pile of rock and rubble shift and glance over her head towards the rest of the market with quartz eyes. From the form alone she knew them to be a troll, recognising them from a fading description in one of the Old Tales. The troll in that story was violent and quite literally bloodthirsty, and nothing at all like this one. Rowan felt a twinge of disappointment, and then a great deal of awkwardness. She had never been rescued from anything before. How was this supposed to go? She gave an awkward little bow that immediately drew the troll’s attention and they raised their immense hands, veined through with thin lines of opal.

‘Ah, uh, you don’t have to—Please don’t do that.’

Rowan felt her face glow with fresh humiliation. This was awful. She straightened up with enough speed to jar her neck painfully, taking a slow breath to steel herself.

‘My apologies. I’m not... Not often in the practise of being saved.’

This, finally, appeared to be the right response. The troll’s face split in another smile, and it laughed with the sound of rocks scraping together.

‘I can tell.’

Susannah Rae

Susannah Rae is working on her first novel and also writes poetry and short stories. She lives in Kenilworth, Warwickshire. After studying English Literature and French at Oxford Brookes University, she discovered a love for language and decided to complete the MA in Creative Writing at The University of Manchester in order to pursue a career in writing. Inspired by her mother and grandmother, who also write poetry, she took poetry modules and developed her passion. She is currently working on a novel exploring the difficulties that a young woman must face in modern society.

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The Butterfly Farm

Arched windows laminated
with mould muffle the sunlight;
trap heat within their prism.
The air is polluted with colour.

The kid in front slams his foot
into the ground, smudging
powdered bodies along a pathway
now littered with wings.

You tremble, mahogany flecked
with blue, fragile as blown glass,
like me, when I am pushed to the ground
by a man who reminds me of him.

I place my finger on the floor
for you to climb and we escape
to the waterfall; watch the fish
quiver beneath bubbles.

We creep into Minibeast Metropolis.
A Pumpkin Patch Tarantula flexes
his legs against the glass and I turn
to shield you from his gaze.

When our hour is up I lay you to rest,
hidden in a den of green leaves.
I wonder if you are asleep
or just pretending

like I do late at night.
From the gift-shop I buy a butterfly
magnet and balance it on my finger
all the way back to the car.

A Trip to Wonderland

Hey Alice, remember last summer
when we did acid in my room? You said
you needed a break from life, so we shut
our books and set the day aside.

You lay beside me on the bed, glowing rose
in the circle of flower fairy-lights. You held my hand;
asked if I would follow you. The tab melted
into my tongue.

You wanted something soft. I stole
my cat from the landing and she nestled
into your lap, blushing pink in the petaled light.
I pulled my fingers through her fur. Her grin

coiled. Someone revved a motorbike
inside her belly. We drank tap water
from my Cadbury's cup and you lifted
your legs into the air,

watched as they swelled to the ceiling,
pressed your bloated toes against
the window until
I wondered if the glass would crack.

You asked to stay here; shrouded
in pink, warm and cottoned
in my slept-in grey sheets,
far from home and the Red Queen.

You've been away for a while now, Alice.
Your Mum's asking if there were any signs,
but I look at your face, smiling above the fireplace,
and think it's best not to tell her, not tonight.

This is the first few pages of a short story about a young homeless woman and the struggles she faces on a daily basis.

Searching for Heat

Watery sunlight seeped through the tear in the sleeping bag. Liv twisted the hood from underneath her head and pulled it over her eyes, attempting to shield herself from the light and claim ten more minutes of sleep. She had not slept well last night. A rattling cough had settled within her chest over the past few weeks and the recent turn in the weather had only made it worse. The nights were now bitterly cold, the pavement frosting over with a crisp layer of ice. A few cars grumbled faintly in the distance, early risers on their way to work, and birds chirped from the branches of nearby trees.

This was her favourite time of day. The streets belonged only to her and for a brief moment she felt peaceful. She'd settled in one of her usual spots last night, under the eaves of an old bank which were supported by thick, beige columns. Huddling close to the wall meant that she was provided with shelter from the rain and it kept her relatively hidden from people stumbling home during the night. She had chosen that spot at the very beginning to be close to her friend Ben. At first Liv had been wary of talking to people, especially older men, but he had been kind and friendly when plenty of others had kept to themselves. He'd shared his food and blankets and offered advice about the safest places to sleep. Liv had settled for the bank, happier in the knowledge that Ben was nearby. That was before Clara, his old Jack Russell, had died. Now, he retreated to an alcove further down the street. Liv supposed that he wanted to be alone.

The streets would soon be teeming with people and she wanted to be gone before then. She shrugged the sleeping bag off her shoulders and stuffed her belongings into her backpack, exhausted and threadbare from overuse and exposure to the weather. She didn't have much; a water bottle, an old breakfast bar, she was wearing all the clothes that she owned to try to fend off the cold. Slinging her bag onto her back she gathered the pillow and sheets of cardboard in her arms and set off to see Ben.

Cold air caught in her throat as she walked. Feeling breathless she stopped to stretch, tugging the neck of her jumper up around her chin. Her legs were stiff and her back throbbed. She twisted her ankles and wrists and heard them crack softly. She felt about fifty years old.

The hurried clapping of high heels echoed off the surrounding buildings as a woman brushed past, jabbering on the phone. She turned to apologise, a hand outstretched in a semi-wave, but looked away when she noticed the bundle of bedding and scruffy clothes. Liv never looked in the mirror anymore. She avoided glancing at herself in shop windows. These days, she was greeted by a

skinny reflection with greasy hair and large purple-blue bags underneath her eyes. Before all of this she had loved to dress up nicely; she'd spend an hour perfecting her makeup, paint her nails bright colours, and leave the house feeling beautiful. She'd even started biting her nails now, a bad habit which reminded her of her brother. She would often find chunks of his nails littered around the house, embedded into the carpet and down the cracks in the sofa. They'd have screaming rows about how gross it was. She longed for those arguments now.

Liv reached Ben's alcove and sat down next to him. He looped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a tight hug. It was impossible to tell how old Ben was; his dull, grey beard engulfed most of his face and he pulled his beanie so far down that it covered his eyes. He'd obviously been out in the rain most of last night. His trousers were sodden and clung to his legs, and his sign had started to disintegrate. Once reading *HOMELESS PLEASE HELP*, the words were now distorted and almost illegible. Ink dripped through the grooves in the cardboard and onto the pavement beside him.

Before Clara had died; they would spend hours bouncing Ben's fusty tennis ball off the pavement for the dog to catch. Ben had joked that she was too fat, so he was saving his money to pay for her gym membership. Liv wanted to tell him that she missed him, that she hated sleeping by the bank on her own. But there was no use, he needed the space.

The day Clara died was the coldest it had been for a long while. Shop windows were cloudy with frost and cars were skidding on a film of black ice which covered the road. Clara was nestled into a blanket. Kneeling beside them, Liv had stretched out her arm and buried her fingertips in the dog's soft fur. She felt her small body shake beneath her touch.

'Is she alright?' Liv had asked.

'Jus' the cold I think, blankets not much use 'cause it's sodding wet.'

'Do you want mine? I'll need it back later but... for now?'

'Don't worry yourself love. You need that. We'll be fine,' he shot an affectionate glance towards the lump under the blanket. 'Won't we dog?'

Recalling the memory, Liv felt a nauseating sense of guilt settle within her stomach. She should have made them take her sleeping bag, she didn't even use it. She squeezed Ben's hand and rested her head on the brick wall behind her.

'How you doing love?' Ben asked.

'I'm fine,' she replied, stifling a cough.

'That cold got any worse?'

'No, I'm okay,' she lied. The pain in her chest had been getting worse each day, but she didn't want to worry him. He had enough on his plate. 'I'm gonna go, want to hide my stuff before it gets busy.'

'Pop by later won't you sweetheart?'

'Course,' she said, waving goodbye over her shoulder as she stood and walked

down the road.

Liv had always thought Leamington was beautiful. She spent hours as a teenager wandering up and down the Parade; a long high-street with tall white buildings that stretched into the distance. It was a bit of a walk, but she decided to stash her stuff behind a skip towards the top of town. It felt safer to leave her belongings there, less chance of them being stolen; that's where all the rich people live, what would they want with anything she owned?

As she walked, she noticed a group of kids on their way to school. They were dressed smartly, wearing black blazers and striped ties which reminded her of her old school uniform. Liv felt her lungs contracting, the familiar itch at the back of her throat. She coughed as quietly as she could, attempting to dislodge the thick layer of mucus that was caught on her chest. One of the boys looked up, spotted her further along the pavement, and gestured towards the other side of the road. They crossed. Liv looked away and pretended that she hadn't seen.

Turning down the side alley at the back of a corner shop she located the skip. She dropped her bag and quickly covered it with the sheets of cardboard. A pulse of pain spasmed from the pit of her stomach, reminding her that she had hardly eaten for a few days. Luckily today was Wednesday, which meant that The Salvation Army would be open from 9.30am.

Liv made her way to the building on Chapel Street. Arriving just before it opened, she sat down in the doorway and hugged her knees to her chest. She entwined her fingers together, drew her hands towards her mouth, and blew hot, damp breath into the fabric of her gloves. Closing her eyes, Liv felt her breath rattle and a raking cough shook her body.

Kristi Rose

Kristi Rose is an outrageously Northern writer currently living in the deep south (i.e. Manchester). She is working on *Sans Corpus*, a literary suspense novel which examines the grisly death of one man, and the motives of the seven women who each may or may not have murdered him. The novel is set in the North-East and spans the latter half of the 20th century. When not writing Kristi enjoys making tapestries of rude words, as well as doing her bit to further the Gay Agenda™; going door to door spreading the good word of our lord and saviour, Elton John.

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The following is the opening sequence from Sans Corpus, a suspense novel.

December 1999

Murder hung in the air. A small congregation of women encircled the man in the dead-centre of the room. *Still beautiful*, one of them thought, crossing herself as she sank to her knees and began to pray. His dirty blonde hair was folded into a bun at the base of his skull, with handfuls pulled out and matted, like he'd been dragged by it. His long, blunt nose had been broken once or twice, but not recently, and high cheekbones jutted from his thin face. He had a short beard and the blood that had burst from his mouth hours before had dripped down over his chin and dried to almost black. His full, stained lips were slack, as if a sigh of sour, nighttime breath might escape them at any moment. Two slivers of silver iris were just visible beneath heavy lids, dark circles stamped beneath them like footnotes of exhaustion. Long eyelashes clumped together as if he'd cried. The thick, frayed skin of his neck rested on a tarnished silver platter, atop a pillar of bibles. The rest of him was missing.

They were in an old top-floor suite in a cheap hotel on the outskirts of the city, probably once one of the best rooms in the building, but now half-forgotten and used for storage. Cigarette-smoke stained wallpaper peeled from damp walls, and shadowy carcasses of broken furniture cluttered the bare floorboards. A mattress slumped drunkenly in a corner. A few cardboard boxes of old junk,

maybe lost property, were disintegrating under the room's only window, beside a heap of individually-wrapped mini soaps and shampoo bottles, all stamped with *The Townley Inn*. There were two white-washed doors leading from the room – one to the dingy corridor outside and one to a mouldering en-suite.

The seven women had arrived one by one about an hour before, each walking past the uninterested front desk clerk with a smile and a nod like they were supposed to be there, and made their way up the stairs and down a series of increasingly dilapidated hallways until they found room 672. The door was unlocked, and each woman had walked into the room quietly and taken a seat, until there were seven. The last to arrive locked the door behind her.

As the women sat in almost-silence, the pale sun sank behind the crumbling warehouses opposite the hotel and the room grew dark. One of the women lurched from her seat and barely made it into the en-suite before a retch and a splatter of vomit on tiles echoed through the room. A young, pregnant blonde sobbed into her hands, and the warm breath of the praying women crystallised into cloudy wisps as she whispered fervently in Spanish. There was a smoky fizz as someone sucked the last fumes from a hand-rolled cigarette before she dropped it to the bare floorboards and stamped out the glowing end with the toe of her boot.

'Are we just going to sit here in the dark then?' she asked. No one answered. She stood up, and crossed the room to the door, touching the walls at shoulder height until her fingers found a cold plastic light switch. She flicked it a couple of times but nothing happened. She sighed. 'Anyone hiding a lamp in their knickers?'

'I brought candles,' said the woman closest to the window, pulling a handful from the handbag at her feet.

The cigarette-smoking woman took them with a nod, and climbed back onto the barstool she'd been sitting on. She fumbled in her pocket for a second before producing a match, and then opened one side of the oversized leather jacket she was wearing and swiped it up a strip of worn sandpaper sewn to the interior. She lit the candles and passed them around the women so that the room was filled with flickering light. Each candle cast a shadow of him, and his blurred silhouettes filled the room, shivering on the walls.

'This is a murder scene, not a seance,' said a woman on the other side of the room sourly, though she held a candle. She was an angular woman in her mid-forties. Her dark but greying hair was short, cut close at her neck and a little longer on top. She smoothed it and pushed it behind her ears every few minutes with bony, unpolished fingers.

'What's your point?' the woman next to her asked.

'My point,' the angular woman replied, snapping her head around to look at the women in the room, 'is that we're all sitting around looking at this decapitated gentleman, lighting candles as if we're in a bloody coven. What next? Shall we recite a spell?'

'What's your name, love?'

'I don't think I feel comfortable telling you that.'

'Oh, god. Make one up then.'

'Fine. Call me... call me Popeye.'

'Popeye?'

'Yes! Is that good enough for you?'

'She has a point,' said the woman who had thrown up, leaning back in her armchair and crossing her legs. 'I don't trust any of you, the last thing I'm going to tell you is my name.'

A couple of the other women nodded.

'Alright, let's all use aliases,' said the woman who had been praying, pushing herself back up and onto her chair. She had dark, curly hair and a long, ragged scar that ran from the corner of her left eye to her jawbone.

'Fair enough,' said the cigarette-smoking woman, who was lighting a new cigarette with the candle she was holding. She held the smoke in her lungs for a few seconds and then blew it towards the ceiling. She pointed at the young pregnant woman. 'Obviously, you're Baby.'

Baby shrugged.

'Posh, Ginger, Scary,' she said, pointing to the praying woman, a woman with long, red hair, and then the woman who had thrown up in turn.

'Racist, but whatever,' said Scary, raising one eyebrow and folding her arms.

'Not because you're-'

'Let's just choose our own names, shall we?' said the red-haired woman quickly, 'I'm Strings.'

'Fine,' said the cigarette-smoking woman, rolling her eyes. 'I'll be Pigro.'

'Lupé,' said the praying woman.

'Flash,' said the woman who had thrown up.

'I'm Meg,' said the woman who had brought the candles.

'Baby's fine,' said Baby quietly.

'Rather than sitting around making up silly nicknames, does anyone else think it's about time that we rang the police?' said Popeye, jutting her chin out defiantly and glancing around the women. She gripped her candle with both hands, and the light flickered across her pointed features. Her pale blue eyes were stretched wide and the light cast twitching spider-leg shadows from her short, spiky eyelashes up over her pencilled-on eyebrows. A silky whisper drifted around the room at the word police. Pigro scoffed as she exhaled and started to cough.

'If you were going to ring the police, you'd have done it an hour ago when you walked in. You're as deep in this as we all are.'

'What are you implying?'

'Well since you're here, I assume you got the same note that I did.'

Matt Smith

Matt Smith is a graduate of The University of York. While living in this charming city, he discovered he had a talent for talking about himself in the third person and thought he might give writing a go. Matt is interested in producing complex and unique narrators, ranging from fractured and unreliable narration to the realm of sci-fi, where inhuman voices test the limits of empathy and understanding. His name is already well known in many circles, unfortunately as of yet he is rarely attached to it. It is a very common name after all.



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The Conversion Centre

I couldn't be sure they weren't listening, but I had to tell someone.

After careful observation, I had decided on Arthur as the most likely of the 'patients' to be a real human. I thought this because he was odd. This might seem like a strange criterion for trust, but that place often felt like everyone had been cast for their roles, like actors in a play. Not Arthur. He was different, unconventional in a way I doubted the enemy had been able to simulate yet. I sat opposite him in the small sitting room just off the main corridor. I'd searched the room several times and couldn't find any microphones or cameras. Even so I could've missed something. It was a risk, but the secret was too large to keep to myself.

'Arthur?' I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

Arthur didn't respond. He sat in a big leather armchair staring glassy eyed at his feet. I wondered what drug they'd given him, Chlorpromazine maybe, or Levomepromazine: One of the dopey ones. Whatever it was, they must have upped his dose. I felt sorry for him, his head was half filled with sawdust when he got there. I looked at him critically, he was skinny, even more so than when he arrived. His wispy hair, which normally stood on end from him constantly running his fingers through it, now lay almost flat. Truthfully, he didn't seem the revolutionary type but he might still know something. Besides if he were like me, I had to save him; no one else was looking out for us.

'Arthur,' I said, raising my voice a fraction.

His head gave a slight tremor as if to shake off a bothersome fly.

'Arthur! If you don't listen to me you're going to lose what's left of your mind!'

That got his attention. He slowly rotated his eyes around to look at me, head lolling slightly on his neck.

'Aye' am listening'

He slurred a little over his words and his gaze drifted upwards and away from my face. I still felt he wasn't entirely focused, but then focus was hard to find in the Conversion Centre. I pressed on.

'I don't think they can hear us right now so we can talk freely. I'm fairly sure I can trust you, and I want you to know that you can trust me. You're the only one in here they drug as heavily as me. That must mean you know things, important things. That's right, isn't it, Arthur?'

Arthur nodded and I felt a burst of excitement, finally, I thought, after all this time, someone who saw it as well. I shot another furtive glance around the room. Comfy chairs, colourful walls and inspirational posters, all to hide what that place really did. It was sickening. Between every bright shade and motivational platitude was a lie, clear to anyone with a brain. Unfortunately there weren't many of those around anymore. I looked back at Arthur, he had turned away again, apparently unforthcoming with his secrets. I would have to go first. I took a deep breath and began to talk quickly; I had no idea how long we'd have.

'Okay, I don't know how much you know already, but I'll let you in on what I know and you can tell me what you've seen. They look like us, feel like us, even bleed like us, but they don't think like us. They don't have brains, just cogs and wheels and little microchips to keep them running. They've been taking over for a long time now, slowly, patiently, all the way up to the top. They've put us in here because we've come some way towards figuring it all out and...'

Arthur snored loudly, interrupting my monologue. I growled an expletive and fought the urge to slap him awake. I restrained myself. That was no way, after all, to cultivate a budding friendship. Besides, he was so drugged up that I doubted he'd be much use right then. I'd have to talk to him some other time. He was the only one I had any confidence wasn't one of them and I needed to tell someone. The Conversion Centre was designed to make you doubt yourself and sometimes it made even me wonder. They threw you in amongst the crazies and acted like you were one of them. I'd have to be careful though. The moment someone in authority overheard you talking like this, they'd pump you full of drugs like poor Arthur there, and let you spend the next few days swimming across the temperate seas of drug induced calm, incapable of thought, incapable of protest.

The door opened and Nurse Gabel stepped through. She was blonde, pretty and blue eyed, as always dressed in a light blue tunic that clung to her figure in a flattering way. She looked like somebody's idea of a nurse. As such she was

thoroughly unconvincing. If there was one thing the enemy hadn't understood yet, it was that nobody ever looks like you expect them to. She glanced at Arthur's inert form on the chair then flashed me a disarming smile. Even though I knew she wasn't real I couldn't resist smiling back. Probably for the best, I thought, it was always better when I appeared ignorant.

'Come on Paulo,' she said, 'Dr Hayes would like to see you in his office.'

I stared at her, struggling to keep the guilt off my face.

'Errmm what for?' I asked.

'Oh Paulo,' she said, swatting me on my arm 'you're always so forgetful, it's for your assessment. It's the same time every week.'

'Oh yes,' I said, 'I'm sorry, I'll go over now'

I was actually pretty sure my assessment wasn't for another couple of hours, but it was always better to play along. They controlled time in the conversion centre, along with much else. They had likely moved my session to prevent me spending too long with Arthur. I followed her out of the room.

'So Mr Hernandez...'

Dr Hayes addressed me patiently. He wanted to know how much of my head they'd filled with sawdust. He appeared middle aged, (the machines never really age but it would be suspicious if they all looked young). He was bald aside from some blonde stubble around his ears, his eyes were bright blue and full of malicious intelligence.

'How're you feeling at the moment? Everything going okay? Nothing upsetting you?'

I could see his cold eyes searching me. Watching for any sign of weakness. I'd been very self controlled those past few weeks. When I first arrived I had clawed at the walls of my cell screaming for them to let me out. They'd drugged me heavily after that. I avoided his eyes, looking instead at his bald head which was weirdly shiny, as if he'd had it buffed with wax.

'Mr Hernandez?'

I imagined splitting that head open like an egg and watching the gears spill out.

'No.'

I lied, meeting his eyes at last and smiling blandly at him. How calm can you be when you're trapped in a prison run by totalitarian robots?

'I've been right as rain, feeling healthier everyday.'

He didn't look entirely convinced and frowned at his notes.

'So you understand, what we do here? That we're trying to help you?'

Sure you are, I thought, in the same way Mengele was only trying to help.

'Absolutely!'

I could not reveal even a glimmer of doubt. Sawdust brains do not doubt,

they only do and I had to pretend to have a sawdust brain if I ever wanted to make it out of there.

‘You’ve said before that you think not everyone in this world is actually human, that I am not human. Do you know what you meant when you said that?’

He looked at me intently. His eyes, sharp as flint, monitored my face for any signs of weakness. His concentration was so intense that I could hear the whirring of tiny cogs spinning fast inside his head.

‘I don’t.’

I spoke quietly now, and averted my eyes to the floor, away from his penetrating gaze. I tried to look ashamed of myself.

‘A lot of what I’ve said before doesn’t make much sense anymore. It’s hard to even understand that it was me who said it.’

I looked up again and Hayes was smiling, in a way that was clearly supposed to be encouraging but managed to be somehow predatory.

‘I’m pleased to hear it...’

Marina Vassilopoulos

Marina Vassilopoulos works and resides within central Manchester. She can often be found writing her experimental short fiction in various cafés whilst fawning over patrons' dogs. Born in America and having resided in various parts of the world, her passion for creative writing was reignited at the University of Sussex after undertaking an MA in Modern and Contemporary Fiction. She enjoys reading and writing about the diaspora, feminism, and present social issues such as mental health.

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Medusa's Maps

My first memories occupy the balmy streets of Singapore, the concrete jungle where I grew to hate the sensation of perspiration. As the sticky honey of sweat dribbled down our spines, our mother would often trickle cool water from clenched rags to quash our burning skin. The slow drip of the water was never cooling, but always cold.

Evenings slid towards sanity. Stifling heat gave way to gentle breezes, the whispers of which were the matinee affair, support acts for the concerts of the crickets. As traffic slowly dissipated and the city fell to slumber, they rose from their beds to strum their manic lullabies.

I learnt at a young age that their chirping is a form of 'stridulating'. A pleasant word, but tarantulas can stridulate too. Even the most abhorrent things have beauty within themselves.

I sometimes wonder if my insomnia began there. I became used to forces outside of my control taking the reins of my sleeping pattern. There has always been a prevalence of noises in the night.

Nowadays it's my brain, rather than the insects, that tends to stridulate in the later hours, singing the unwanted noises. Or, perhaps, I am a cricket?

We always wore thick soled shoes in Singapore. Sandals made of thick cut leather, with buckles of cheap brass that clicked with each step. These weighed down my fleeting childhood feet that longed to carry me away from the grotesque metropolis and towards beauty.

Disney and distant parents make for an imaginative childhood. I always thought that if I could escape the constraints of normality, of life as I knew it, I'd be consumed into that scenery. That somewhere, past the corners of our flat pack home, there'd be elephants who'd swing me from their trunks and bathe me in shallow pools. That perhaps there existed gorillas who would preen me, transform me into their Tarzan queen. There might be giant hyenas (I was never a cat person) who would let me ride their sleek bodies into the dusk. A land beyond time; a land before humanity.

This was prohibited by the abominable green leash my mother bought me after my first attempted escapade. When she was distracted by an old friend, I took my chance. Between the racks of clothes in a department store, I curled like a cat amongst starched fabric, knees heated by the purrs of contented breath. I fell asleep dreaming of games: this time I lived amongst the dinosaurs. Herein it was T-rex, rather than my mother, who was my greatest foe. His arms were unable to grasp me.

They found me two hours later when a woman, reaching for a blouse, accidentally grabbed a fistful of a yelping hair. I learnt that there's no sympathy in games. A slap is a slap. That leash bit into each of my shoulders like a fraying backpack. It was always her favourite colour, Crayola vomit green.

I would often try to run away from my family. From friends. From teachers. Always running, incapable of staying in the same place for long. A necessity to keep learning about the world around us, if only to make sense of it. As I've aged, the only difference is that I'm less quick about it. Adulthood does that to you.

I suppose it's worse now, as I increasingly find myself running, even from myself. What do you do, when a house is no longer a home? There's a sentry guarding something no longer sentient.

I don't remember the innards of our home, only blurred scenes. My personal favourite: I'm dancing on the sofa to S Club 7 and tumbling, only to lose my first tooth; my first real memory of pain. I remember watching one of our fish spurt out babies and having the prominent realisation of how complex the world around us can be. Most hazily, there's sitting on the floor, drunk, because my father, on one of his rare visits home from a business trip, accidentally gave me an alcopop instead of lemonade. I remember it was a Mike's hard lemonade. I learnt to drink before I knew how to spell.

My favourite place was always the gardens in our complex. I often sat beneath the mottled arms of a Banyan tree. Each branch looked like Medusa's hair, a path upon a map into a new world. Simultaneously north, east, south, west. A tree of endless possibilities.

The gardens were encircled by impossibly high concrete walls crowned with barbed wire. I always thought that the wire there was to keep children like myself in, the ones who felt there was something unspeakable beyond them, and that something was being kept from us. If only I'd know that when one lowers walls, they invite danger.

Our family friend Zoe once visited in the height of summer. She made the decision to walk barefoot through the grass. In the days that followed, she'd repeatedly complain that one of her feet was unbearably itchy, and that she must've caught a fungal infection. When she visited the doctor, they found worms embedded beneath the skin. White, wriggling tubers, like the filaments of our bones, trying to flee their imprisonment within human flesh.

Christine Walker

Christine Walker is a poet and a fiction writer from Jamaica. She has lived in Negril, Kingston, and Treasure Beach, and is now based in Cheshire with her two children and her imaginary dog, Frodo. Her work ranges from verse to prose, which brings to life the people, the landscape, and the dialect of Jamaica. In 2018, she graduated from The University of Salford with First-Class Honours in English and Creative Writing. The featured work is the first six pages of the revenge tragedy she is currently working on, which is set in Negril, Jamaica.



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1

It was as though they never were. As though neither Lenny nor his younger brother, Redman who would sometimes laugh so hard that he would run out of breath, had ever lived. Lenny, unlike Redman, was no laugher. He was infamous in the small fishing town of Negril for his dark distant eyes and his neurotic mood swings. He would often work himself into a rage, chasing his younger sister, Marie, with an unsheathed ratchet knife. On those days their mother, Peggy, would hurry behind Marie up the concrete stairs. She would lock the bedroom door behind her to prevent him from goring Marie with his blade. The most vivid memories Lenny had left behind were the hate his family so often saw in his sad and downcast eyes, his profound shyness, his swiftness with his knife, and the awful way in which he and his brother, Redman, died.

Peggy never fully recovered from the unexpected loss of both sons. Most nights, she would wake up screaming – haunted by the stiffness and the lifelessness of their swollen and discoloured faces and the stoutness of their once slender bodies. Other times, just before twilight, when the hens had flown up onto their roosts on the low branches behind the family home, Peggy would bolt the kitchen door and walk onto the veranda. From there, she would see Lenny coming through the front gate. He would be wearing his white cotton t-shirt, his black jeans, and carrying a black plastic bag. In disbelief, Peggy would blink and the spectre would pass from her eyes, leaving her shaking in a cold sweat. She had

seen both bodies arranged tactfully in the brown caskets that the Justice of the Peace, Mr. Levy, had contributed to the family. Like most of Peggy's neighbours, Mr. Levy was not unaccustomed to homicides but he was unaccustomed to the gruesome murders of young people he knew. The residents in Red Ground, Negril had grown up seeing fishermen pulling nets for a living, had seen the rise of tourism, and had watched many painters capture the soothing sunset as it faded into the blueness behind the tranquil beaches. But they had never witnessed such brutal acts. Especially ones committed by the sons of two close and well-known families in the District. For this reason, no one could keep quiet about the waste of life and about the frivolities, which had caused them to commit such crimes.

2

The Whirlpool air conditioner at the back of Peggy's two-storey concrete house hummed noisily. From the brown louvered windows, a wisp of cool air leaked slowly into the stillness of the humid air. It was the hottest summer anyone in Red Ground could remember. It had not rained for over eight months and the water in the steel drums had long receded to dry patches, flaking at the bottom of the barrels. Three years before, the sidewalks on the main road into Red Ground had been excavated and large pipelines were laid. Yet the silver conduits now standing in most back gardens had no water coming from them. The owners had seen a cloudy slither of liquid dripping from the taps after the General Election but had seen nothing since. To them, their dream of showering under a lukewarm pipe was still a distant fantasy. Those who could afford to buy water had their barrels filled twice a month by the local fire station, a mile towards the beach where the water pressure was strong enough to wash a house down. For many, the price of water was an early morning walk to the fire station. They would fill the few small kegs and jugs they were allowed for free, and would take them away on their shoulders or on their heads.

But twenty-one-year-old Redman did not consider himself low enough to carry the clear liquid. He worried that he would be seen bearing the white kegs, stained with fingerprints, that Peggy kept under the dusty kitchen table. He would often joke to his older brother, Lenny, that he was too handsome to be juggling water. Peggy could never get him out of bed to help. Redman, standing at five foot eight, was taller than Lenny who was five foot four inches. He had curly black hair and a pair of pronounced dimples on his cheeks. His skin was light brown, a reminder of his German ancestor on his father's side who had come over to Jamaica to work on the Plantations after they were liberated. Redman knew none of the nuances of this history and he never asked his mother about it, because to him, as to many Jamaicans, it did not matter where his ancestors came from. His vanity did not only prohibit him from carrying water, it also

forbade him from finding a nine to five. For he did not want to work for what he referred to as the Bucky-Marshalls. Instead, he preferred the idea of working for himself and living by the roughness of his own voice. He wanted to become a dancehall DJ, belting out harsh and feverish melodies that would get young women whining and singing along. But when he was not laid up in bed listening to Buju Banton, Beenie Man, or Bounty Killer and pondering what they had that he did not, he was out gambling in the streets with the neighbour's sons, Bungo and Wayne. On those days when Lenny was not labouring on a construction site or mixing cement with a shovel under a shadeless sky, Redman would persuade him to join him in his gambling pursuits.

At 8:00 am, Redman would often wake, pour himself a full basin of water from a bucket in the kitchen, and carry it to the bathroom where the walls were tiled in green. There he would brush his perfectly formed teeth in front of a small oval mirror before washing his face with glycerine soap. After which, he would empty the leftover creamy water down the toilet bowl; flushing away the waste from the night before.

Marie hated that Redman used a full basin and would argue with him over it. Redman was never one to argue back about anything. Instead he would joke his way out of the situation by making fun of himself. This would leave the aggressor feeling more agitated than before. But it was Lenny, short with a thin crescent face, who would pick up and sustain the heated disagreement. Lenny was fifteen months older than Redman and was equally embarrassed about carrying buckets of water on his head. But he didn't like to see his mother exhausting herself with hard work and would rise early with Peggy and Marie. He would sometimes carry an extra bucket after Marie and Peggy had returned to bed, before heading back to sleep himself. Lenny felt Marie had no right to tell Redman what he should or should not do with the water. His willingness to defend Redman even when Redman was in the wrong often bewildered everyone around them, including Redman himself.

But the extent of Lenny's affection became apparent on the day the brothers began their premature journey to their final resting place. On that day, a dark and dense cloud settled over the community. Many had hoped the grey clouds would bring the rain they had been praying for. But it was on that inauspicious day that a white pig was set loose in a field a few miles from the house of Lenny and Redman.

Their quiet and obsequious neighbour, Wayne had led the sow to the pastureland a few miles away. In protest, the animal whined and pulled on the rope around its neck. Wayne dragged it through the long dead grass, taking care to avoid the sporadic clusters of prickly thorns. His black shoes and trouser-legs were covered with small furry balls of macka, which pinned themselves to the powdery red dirt covering his shoes. The smell of sweet over-ripened Graham

mangos permeated the air and sedated the pig. It lifted its large plump head, sniffing at the drifting air. Wayne spotted the mango tree and led the emphatic pig towards it. It then became a willing hostage, as it cantered towards the smell. The tree, still in full foliage, towered above them, its silver bark large and powerful. It stood among the dried grass like a superior life source, giving hope to the birds and to the pig who for a moment seemed to have forgotten the rope around its stout neck. It began rooting at the base of the tree, tearing at the dry grass, then its mouth stretched open; it closed its searching eyes, and crunched into a fallen fruit. Yellow sticky juice squirted from the mango's flesh and trickled down the sides of its hairy mouth. The sow's jaws rotated from left to right in unadulterated delight. Wayne quickly tied it to the mango tree and waited for the others to arrive.

Minutes later, Wayne saw Redman and Lenny walking through the four-acre field. Redman was smiling in anticipation. Wayne moved towards them, taking care to avoid the macka bush.

"Where is you brother?" Redman called out to Wayne when he realised Bungo was not in the field.

"Him getting Oneblood!" Wayne shouted back. Wayne was eighteen years old but he looked more like a fourteen-year-old boy. His shoulders were narrow and underdeveloped. Although he was taller than Lenny, he did not have Lenny's body mass. It was rumoured in the community that his dead grandfather's duppy had drank from his nippy-bottle when he was a baby. But his mother, Miss June, would curse anyone she heard saying it was so.

A few seconds later, Wayne and Redman were standing face to face.

Arabella Watkiss

Arabella Watkiss is a poet based in London. She came to Manchester to study on the Creative Writing MA after an English Literature degree at the University of York. She is interested in the truth of experience and the realities of 21st century relationships, and is currently rewriting mythological sexual assault narratives (including the stories of Penelope and Leda) and a libretto based on Lorca's *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*, which will be performed at The Dancehouse Theatre in Manchester in September. She has recently been appointed Academy Assistant at Faber and Faber.

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The Medusa Jellyfish

It lay limp on the wet sand,
sweating under the sky, tentacles splayed
around its central neon clover.

A silver sun, already dead,
the boys ran to cut out its heart.
They took stones to it, slashed it open,

ripped out veins mapped under
the hooded skin. They threw at each other,
chunks of the mesoglea, sucking their salty fingers;

never once touched its sting,
soft venomous capsules, like lucent, orange
Omega-3 tablets.

One of the boys pulled white from her body,
sticky necklaces hanging from his fingers.
She didn't look at him

as he left; as he got bored
with the violence and went
to play another game.

Days later, the pale sun hung low in the sky;
striated cliffs scored the skyline
and the waves kept coming in.

The jellyfish was alive,
gently contracting in the water, all its organs intact.
It floated away on the ocean current.

On Car Crashes

For Patrick

That last, uncompromising day, we sat
on the hill above your hometown,
watching the wildflowers
turn to dead, black crowns:
they rocked on the horizon.
When you left, it wasn't

ships breaking their bodies
on the island rocks
or a girl hit by metal
weight going 90,
bones through her flesh
like a cook de-boning a raw, white fish.

It was an old boat, anchored by
the lighthouse
where we first kissed,
yellowed under sun, holed hull
letting the water in.
It was underwhelming.

It was like breaking out of a
prison cell when the door had been left open.
It wasn't a collapsed lung;
it was Pleurisy, then Pneumonia.
I had to take shallow
breaths for weeks.

It wasn't like we wanted to kill each other.
It wasn't all those pricks
my friends have dated.
It wasn't a car crash.
That, you weren't.
So I wanted you to stay, naturally.

On Losing Grandad

He lies in the blue room,
thick eyelids like dimpled gyoza, lipping his eyes,
dull pearls that stare not into mine.

Red veins diverge under the sick skin and
I'm reminded of the tiny red spiders
we found on brick walls as kids.

Sometimes we crushed them with our fingertips.
One day, we let them live, patrolling
the grainy bungalow wall in lines and rows.

A man in a suit walks in and tells me to take my time
but I, awkward, don't want to make a nuisance
of myself, so I hurry the goodbye.

I look round the room, blue and full.
A glass heart that we bought for him in the beginning
hangs from the window, refracting the sunlight.

I kiss Grandad as I am told and under my lips
his skin has hardened, like the surface of a candle
just run out of wick, still soft from burning underneath.

I make sure I watch him the whole time,
as they carry him out into the drizzling cul-de-sac.
I watch as they slide his body into the van,

willing myself to remember
what he looked like and how this felt,
so I can say that I saw him out.

Ryan Whittaker

Ryan Whittaker (RDM Whittaker) was born very early in his life and now lives, works and writes in Manchester with his wife and several cats.

After studying Media, Writing and Production at the University of Bolton, he worked as a business intelligence analyst for several years until he was overcome by an intense need to return to writing. His first novel, *Meat Wagon*, is a southern gothic tale of masculinity, murder, redemption and cosmic horror in the deep south. His other works in progress include a fantasy series and short stories. He is also a musician, artist and colossal nerd.

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Meat Wagon **1. Raymond Herrera**

The ambulance rolled along a thin black strip of cracked asphalt that divided nothingness and red rocks from red rocks and nothingness.

Raymond Herrera prayed. He prayed for the dark, the cold, the stars. He prayed that they would get there in time. He prayed that he'd save one more patient's life, and he prayed for the heroic recognition he deserved. He kissed the dangling gold crucifix and placed it under the folds of his shirt, next to his heart. His fingers came out musky and sticky, and his lips curled back in disgust.

'Estimated time of arrival?' he asked Burnett, the ambulance driver. Burnett did not respond, as usual. *Asshole*.

Ray looked to the arid desolation racing by the window and shielded his eyes. The sun raged near the horizon, scorching the jagged mountains that waited patiently to stab and bury it.

Let the fire die, Ray thought, moving the sweat around his five o'clock shadow with his thumb and forefinger.

The landscape oppressed him from the other side of the glass. It was more than the heat; the dryness shredded the skin between his fingers, and the dust turned his nose to sandpaper. Brush and rock toiled against extinction at the side of the road, while lonely cacti and pockets of razor-grass clumped in exposed cracks across the wide expanses of shifting dust. The landscape had been

impressive at first, imposing and awesome, but lately he'd found it dull, brown and corrosive. Now it promised death and collapse and regret, just like the shifts with Burnett. *Just like dealing with Dad.*

Ray risked a glance at Burnett's reflection in the windshield. Burnett was an emaciated, aviators-wearing hollow man, prone to icy silence and weird haptic jerks. Burnett was what Ray's mom would've called, 'a man with 'faulty wiring'.

'What kind of fuckin' single-digit-IQ incest baby has an accident out here, anyhow?' Burnett mused, leaving the noxious comment to hang in the air. 'Fucking Cedar. There is no town in more dire need of chlorine in its genepool.'

What makes this naco think he's so superior? Ray wondered. His thoughts drifted back to the paramedics in the food hall. *What if they were telling the truth, and it wasn't some newbie hazing ritual?* Burnett was wound tight, no doubt. His methodical movements when he reacted to the imperceptible changes in the road surface seemed more like the reflexes of a getaway driver than ambulance driver.

'Hey Burnett, how far is it now?' Ray asked.

Burnett was focused on the road, disregarding the glitchy GPS as usual. Silence spread like poison and Ray became unsure if he'd even asked the question. He glanced at the tattoo on Burnett's forearm as he navigated the gearbox. It was a knife, blade pointed towards his wrist, wreathed in barbed wire. It was the kind of thing you'd expect a high schooler to draw.

Was he in the military, maybe? Maybe he has PTSD. If he has PTSD, what could set him off? Am I safe?

Ray ignored the questions circling his mind and turned back to the window. He figured that if Burnett was unsuitable for work, someone higher up would've caught it already. The foliage and ground blinked shivers of blue in time with the lights on the top of the cabin. He looked beyond blurring vegetation close to the cabin and fixated on the distance, on the ancient ash and basalt mountains, the dusty mesas. Their skin was heat-blasted and cracked, and deeper shadows pooled in their cavities as sunset approached. They looked like the teeth of the Earth.

What would happen, he asked himself, *if Arizona just swallowed this goddamned ambulance? How long would it be before we were missed?* He was surprised at the thought. But such gloomy contemplations were less stressful than dealing with Burnett, or the looming responsibilities that waited for them further down the road. Ray drew on his experience to banish the thoughts – he had found that he had a solid grip on his emotions, on his sanity, so long as he was invested in the job. He ignored the threat of failure and enjoyed the work under pressure where others couldn't. He knew the endorphins that followed a hard night's work would reward him with deep, gratifying sleep.

There were bad times on the job, of course; you saw the extremes of human life and physical and mental degradation, but you braced yourself for it. His secret childhood fascination with the grotesque also provided a protective layer against

the nightmares of all the bleeding, poisoned, crushed and burnt patients who never made it. You could force yourself onwards if you failed, knowing you did as well as anyone could.

The patients needed him for a few extra moments of life, not the entire recovery. To give them those moments, to get them to hospital and give them a real chance, that was a miracle. The injured and the sick were mostly thankful, hopeful and pleased. They felt God's plan more keenly than anyone, he reckoned, and were a safer audience compared to healthy people. Healthy human beings tend to be the ones with no time for each other, no empathy. They were the source of the real problems in the world, in turns failing to appreciate what they'd been given and making things worse for egotistical reasons.

Is Burnett rubbing off on me?

He remembered his mother's wisdom: *The highs have to have lows to balance them out Raymond; God has a plan for everything, including you!* He smiled at the warmth of the memory, must've been just after Mom got sick. His mind revolted. *And where was Dad?* In jail. He drifted back. He was staring into his kit bag, his gut teeming with worms of frost. All the scalpels, thermometers and defibrillators in the world couldn't fix a sickness like his father's.

Muffled sirens wailed in the distance, creeping towards them from somewhere beyond the bend. As the ambulance followed the road around a wide, rocky pile, multiple sirens blared and the surroundings strobed with frantic light. Red and blue and white bathed them as two patrol cars punched past, their urgency rocking the ambulance.

'What's going on?' Ray asked.

Burnett didn't answer.

'All available units please respond,' crackled a harsh, distorted voice under the radio's digital warble. The signal clipped and spiked.

'That's not for us,' Burnett said, holding his arm over the radio receiver.

'I know,' Ray said, frustrated by the insinuation he didn't.

The dispatcher continued, the signal clearing as they put road between them and the nearby mesa: 'Highway officers report multiple collisions and fires on US Route ninety-three north-east of Yarnell, west of Cedar. Fuel tanker overturned, multiple casualties. All active units expect reduced services coverage in outlying areas.'

'What does that mean?' Ray asked.

'It means that there's a clusterfuck on ninety-three, on the other side of Cedar. Which means that the police, fire and ambulance crews will be drawn to ninety-three like flies on shit. We're on our own out here, buddy, goin' to our priority call. No support.'

'Okay.'

'I got us covered,' Burnett said, reaching under his seat, making the ambulance

swerve to the right and then overcompensate to the left. Ray sucked in a lungful of air and gripped his armrest with his fingernails. A heavy chrome handgun slid into the space between them. The ambulance gently rolled in the correct position like nothing had happened.

Ray recoiled like Burnett had just pulled a snake from under his seat.

‘What the Hell?’ Ray asked.

‘Desert Eagle, mark nineteen, fifty cal. Israeli. It holds the largest centre-fire cartridge of any magazine-fed, self-loading pistol. Solid gun,’ Burnett said. Ray stared at it in silence. Burnett held it by the barrel and offered the grip to Ray. ‘Want to hold it? It’s loaded, so don’t shoot me.’

‘No, I do not want a loaded gun! Watch the goddamned road! Are you serious right now?’

Burnett shrugged and replaced the heavy handgun under his seat like nothing had happened. ‘Anything can happen out here, Raymond. Anything. Never know who you’re gonna meet. Crackheads call from the middle of nowhere, ambush you, steal your van, steal the drugs. Crews like us get stabbed, get killed. Show the freaks a Desert Eagle and they all shit their pants, just like you did.’

‘Please, just watch the goddamned road, Burnett,’ Ray said. He wiped the sweat from his face with a big sigh, his fingers trembling. He needed to be anywhere else. Anywhere but with this guy. Moments passed slow and thick, turning to minutes like treacle. Finally, he added, ‘I’m going to log this when we get back to the hospital, I hope you get that.’

‘Where’s your accent from, Herrera?’ Burnett asked.

‘Michigan.’

‘That why you ain’t no good with the heat? I thought Hispanics were supposed to be good with heat?’

‘That’s an urban myth, you racist dick.’

‘Hey, I ain’t racist, just asking the question. Human races all have the same problem.’

‘Oh yeah? What’s that?’

‘They’re human. All-too-fucking human. Black, white, gay, straight, transsexual. They’re all circling the same drain, making the same mistakes, generation after generation. Consuming until the planet can’t sustain them. Crapping out kids. Global goddamned warming. Narcissists making the homeless eat shit for clicks. Ask me, skin colour don’t matter, we all come out ‘tween shit and piss. We’re all genetic waste, shit onto a conveyer belt of cruelty and harm, destined to do it to others, and for what?’ Burnett asked. Then he threw a curveball: ‘Why’d you come to Cedar, Herrera?’

Dad.

Now it was Herrera’s time to be silent.

‘Suit yourself.’

Ray shook his head and performed his pre-incident pat-down, a habit he picked up from his first ride-along, up in the cold north, near the University of Michigan. *EMT work pants are inspired by military and law-enforcement designs, with upwards of twenty pockets*, he remembered from his supervisor. He'd never bothered to count the number of items he carried, or the number of pockets, but he'd memorised his inventory in sequence. It felt better to feel that they were there.

Bandages, stethoscope, syringes, cellphone, gloves, sharpie, penlight, penlight backup—

'They're all there,' Burnett said. 'No need to check.'

'Uh-huh. And how do you know?' Ray asked. Burnett ignored the question and let silence fill the gap. Ray started to pat himself down again, unsure of what he'd already counted.

Bandages, stethoscope, syringes, cell—

'The way you move, the way you sound, the way you smell. I know. It's all there. I knew it before you got in. Trust in your shit.'

'Lost my place again, thanks,' he said. 'And what do you mean by the way I smell?'

'Quiet,' Burnett said, holding his fist up. He pointed at the shapes beyond the windshield. They approached a Ford flatbed truck stopped in the oncoming lane with some people in front of it, a man and a woman, him sat on the floor, her pacing. In the distance, an SUV was pulled over, its hazards blinking yellow in the fading light. 'Call said a kid came off of a donorcycle. Bring your flashlight. Out here, it gets dark fast. I'll go ahead and scout the kid; you spot check these and come find me.'

Adam Wolstenholme

Adam Wolstenholme worked for ten years in newspaper journalism and now teaches English and Government and Politics. His journalism has appeared in *The Times*, the *Times Educational Supplement* and the *Manchester Review*. His short stories have been published in the anthology *Eating My Words* and on websites including *Brilliant Flash Fiction* and *Flash Frontier*. This is an extract from the third chapter of his novel, *Pandemonium*, a comic drama inspired in part by his teaching experiences. Jonathan is about to meet Olivia Coyle, the wife of his friend and colleague, Tim. Olivia has recently become a Tory MP.



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Pandemonium

‘Guys, we have a problem,’ said Nelson, pushing his laptop aside.

Since finishing the day’s teaching Jonathan had been planning for Monday, glancing up occasionally at Eleanor as she fidgeted and sighed in the seat opposite. She’d seemed stressed since the Ofsted inspection. Maybe she’d fared worse than she was letting on. Now she ran a hand through her hair and said, ‘What fresh hell is this?’

‘We’ve had the feedback on the exercise books,’ said Nelson. ‘Our marking has Met Standards, but there were concerns over Presentation. Stephanie says “all worksheets must be glued securely into exercise books”. The deadline’s Tuesday. So unless you want to spend your weekend going through every single kid’s book, the kids will have to do the bulk of it themselves.’

‘So?’ said Jonathan.

‘So: Where’s our bloody glue gone? I’ve been round your classrooms and this is all I can find.’ With irritated vigour, Nelson rattled a box that contained about ten glue sticks. ‘We had a hundred-and-fifty from the last delivery. We can’t have got through them all.’

‘The kids break them,’ said Eleanor.

‘They’d better not have broken a *hundred-and-fifty*. Anyway, I can’t ask for more. You know how bad the finances are.’

‘Science have got loads, by the way,’ said Jonathan. ‘I saw them in the stock cupboard.’

Eleanor looked at him sharply. ‘What were you doing in there?’

‘Stealing A3 paper?’ said Jonathan.

‘I didn’t hear that,’ said Nelson. Then, ‘How did you get in there?’

‘The lock’s broken,’ said Jonathan.

Nelson stood and paced the room. He removed his cufflinks and rolled his sleeves up over his muscular forearms. ‘I wonder,’ he said, ‘If Science stole some glue from us.’

‘Bastards!’ said Jonathan. ‘Who would *do* such a thing?’

‘Scientists,’ said Eleanor, shaking her head. ‘No morals.’

‘Right,’ said Nelson, placing his fists on the desk. ‘We’re going to have to steal them back. It’s Friday, so they’ll be in a faculty meeting for the next – fifteen minutes. Perfect. So. I nominate you, Jonathan. You’re the sneakiest.’

‘Am I?’ said Jonathan, regretting his confession about the A3 paper.

‘Oh, he’s very sneaky,’ said Eleanor. ‘He’s always scampering out of Pizza Express without paying the bill.’

‘That was *one time!*’ said Jonathan. ‘By *accident!*’

‘Hmm. Off you go, Jonathan,’ said Eleanor.

‘Don’t get caught,’ said Nelson.

Jonathan set off on his mission. As he approached reception he became aware of a woman standing with her back to him: thick, wavy brown hair, a sharp blue suit and high heels. She turned round. She was older than her back view had suggested, early forties maybe. Her large brown eyes had a feline upward tilt at the corners. She seemed vaguely familiar in the way that attractive strangers sometimes did.

‘Are you being seen to?’ he asked her.

‘Well. They know I’m here. I’m not sure what they’re doing about it.’ A deep, slightly slurred, posh voice. ‘But thank you for asking.’

The receptionist bustled in from the office and looked at the woman, annoyed. ‘Just take a seat, madam.’

‘I’d rather stand, thanks.’ She widened her stance, her skirt tightening over strong-looking thighs. The receptionist sighed and disappeared into her office.

The woman was smiling at Jonathan. ‘I’m Olivia Coyle. Tim’s wife.’

Ah, so he *did* recognise her.

‘I thought you looked familiar. Tim’s shown me pictures of you.’

She arched an eyebrow. ‘Pictures?’

‘Well, you know. Family snaps. We’re friends. I’m Jonathan Sefton.’

‘Ah, *you’re* Jonathan. We meet at last.’

With a rattling of bracelets, she extended a hand. It felt smooth and slender. Allowing himself to hold it for a second longer than he should have done,

Jonathan repressed the disloyal thought that Tim had punched above his weight when he'd pulled this woman.

'You teach Cordelia, don't you? You're the one who's finally moved her beyond Harry Potter. You should see the stuff she reads at home now.' Olivia glanced over her shoulder, leaned towards him and stage-whispered, 'Tim doesn't know, but I'm here to see the headteacher.'

'About Cordelia?'

She looked disappointed. 'Come on, Jonathan. About Tim. They're all over him since Ofsted, as I'm sure you're aware. He's teaching an extra lesson right now, I believe.'

'Yeah. Bottom set Year Ten intervention,' said Jonathan. 'A tough gig.'

'And on a Friday night! Ah, here we go.'

Janet, the headteacher's assistant approached, shaking her head. 'I'm very sorry. She's going to be tied up in this meeting until late.'

'Is she now,' said Olivia Coyle.

'If you send me an email I'll make an appointment.'

'I'm afraid that doesn't work for me.'

The two women stared at each other. Then, in a politician's gesture that seemed both theatrical and genuine, Olivia stepped forward and placed a hand on Janet's shoulder.

'Look. I know you're just doing your job. But I'm going to see her now anyway, okay?'

Janet went pale. 'You can't! You'll have to leave or ...' She looked to Jonathan as if appealing for help. But he discovered himself to be on the other side.

'Or what?' said Olivia. 'You'll call the police?' She winced. 'I don't think any of us need that sort of publicity right now, do we? Mr Sefton, if he's got a minute, will show me to her office. He can ensure I don't molest any children on the way.'

Jonathan shrugged at Janet and walked with his new friend down the corridor. Olivia walked at a leisurely pace on clapping heels. At one point she looked up and gave him a deliciously conspiratorial glance. He stopped before Stephanie Hackett's door, keeping clear of its window.

Olivia peered in. 'In a meeting, my *arse*,' she hissed. 'She's playing with her phone. She's probably on fucking *Angry Birds*!'

Jonathan shook his head.

'Okay, thanks, Jonathan. Lovely to meet you.'

Dismissed, he turned away, but stole a look over his shoulder and caught Olivia in a private moment, adjusting her hair as if preparing to step into character.

Jonathan walked down the corridor until he reached the Science stock cupboard. Glancing left and right, he tried the door and found it unlocked. He stepped in. Any guilt was diminished by the sheer profusion of *gluesticks* he discovered in a plastic box on the bottom shelf. Maybe they *had* stolen them.

And anyway, wasn't he committing an act that would benefit not just the English Department but also, ultimately, the *children*? He filled his pockets with gluesticks and, since he was here, helped himself to a rather cute, pocket-sized stapler. And some highlighters. One could never have too many highlighters.

He lingered in the corridor until he heard Olivia Coyle's clopping heels. He turned the corner in time to see her walking past the still-scowling Janet and out of the main entrance. He followed. She was tottering down the steps when she lost her footing and fell sideways. There was an involuntary gasp – '*Fuck!*' – and a cracking sound. Olivia sat down on the step and dipped her head.

Jonathan hurried to her side. 'Are you alright?'

She looked up. 'Jonathan. Just broke my bloody heel. Look at that. I should have splashed out on some Jimmy Choos and put them on expenses.'

'Along with your new duck house?'

'Ha! Maybe not.'

She took his hand for the second time that afternoon and pulled herself to her feet, glancing about. 'Did I get away with that?'

'No-one saw it but me. Good recovery.'

'Ah. I knew you'd be a gentleman.' She took her phone from her bag. 'I'm calling a cab. Tim won't be released from the Iron Maiden for another hour.'

'Yeah, they're really letting him have it, aren't they?'

'Bastards,' said Olivia. 'Sorry, do you mind -?'

Tapping at her phone, she lay a hand on his shoulder, standing precariously on one high-heeled shoe and one bare foot. It was a small, shapely foot, he noticed, with bright red nails. A soft breeze blew from across the playing fields. He caught a whiff of her perfume and her hair.

'Put your phone away,' he said. 'I'll give you a lift.'

Gail Wright

Gail Wright lives and works just outside Manchester. She writes short stories and is also working on the first draft of a novel. After graduating from the University of Bolton with a degree in English & Creative Writing and the award for Outstanding Student in Creative Writing, she returned to her work in childcare. Whilst at Manchester, she has worked on her short story collection, *Small Town Heroes*, of which *Clean Sheets* is one. She has also previously won a competition for flash fiction. Gail loves dogs, wine, books, and salted caramel ice cream. Not necessarily in that order.



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Frank is dealing with the onset of dementia in his wife, Josie. He is insistent that he can manage it himself, until Josie doesn't recognise their daughter Susan, who now lives in Vancouver, on one of their weekly Skype calls.

Extract from *Clean Sheets*

Frank rang the doctor's on Monday morning.

They gave her some tablets, but, the doctor said to Frank, quietly, in a doctorly way, he did have to remember that there was no cure. 'It's about managing it as best we can,' he said, 'for you as well as for Josie.'

The tablets seemed to help. Nothing got better, but it didn't get worse either. Not for a while. Frank had taken temporary leave from being President of the Allotment Society, but he still kept his plot. It was two streets away, a ten minute walk if that, and on warm enough days he took Josie down there with him. He kept a deckchair in the potting shed and she was happy to sit for a while in the sun while he got a few things done. A butterfly landed on her lap once, towards the very end of summer when they were all starting to die off.

'Oh!' she said. 'A rainbow on my table!'

A few minutes later, the butterfly flew off and Josie sang *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* all the way through, word perfect. The kindest and the cruellest days.

Each week, Susan asked if he was managing, and sometimes cried a bit and

touched her fingers to the screen. Said she wished she could be there, and she was going to try and come over really soon. Maybe for Christmas, how would that be? Frank told her not to get all upset, he was managing just fine, and of course she was always welcome, both of them were, she knew that. But not to come on his account because he was absolutely fine. Susan said ok, and she knew he was, and she knew they were welcome, too, but he had to promise her not to be too proud to ask for help. Frank said it wasn't about being proud, just about knowing what to do.

Then the tablets started to wear off quicker, or have less of an effect, or something, and one Tuesday morning just after half past ten, Josie forgot how to walk downstairs six steps from the bottom and stepped out into the space in front of her.

She was lucky, really, said the doctor who treated the grazing across her forehead and bandaged her sprained wrist, because it could have been a lot worse, at her age, and in her condition. But then again, he said, it was possibly her condition that saved her, because her brain probably hadn't told her to tense up as she was falling, so there would have been less impact on her bones as she hit the floor. *Oh yes*, thought Frank, *that is an amazing bit of luck, when your brain doesn't know what to do with your body, isn't it*, but he didn't say anything.

They wanted to keep her in overnight for observation, just to be on the safe side, as any fall at that age can be dangerous. While they were admitting her onto the ward, another doctor took Frank to one side and asked him if he had anyone to assist him at home. Family, friends, anyone. When Frank replied in the negative, the doctor looked at Josie's notes and said he could make a slight change to the medication, but also that it might be time to think about getting some outside help. A care plan. Frank said he'd think about it but they were fine for the moment.

He went home and ordered a single bed and a memory foam mattress from Bed Hypermarket to be delivered the next morning. It was extra for express delivery, but the men were decent types and helped Frank rearrange the living-room furniture and put the bed up too. He found some sheets for a single bed upstairs in the airing cupboard. They had faded fairies on. They must have been Susan's at one point. They'd do for now.

Josie arrived home later that day accompanied by two jovially helpful Patient Transport Service men and an NHS commode.

'No more gallivanting upstairs for you, young lady,' said one of the men, winking at Frank over Josie's head.

Frank didn't wink back.

Josie smiled and nodded. 'No very dear.'

Frank couldn't sleep that night, upstairs on his own in the big bed. He couldn't the next night either. On the third night, he brought the quilt downstairs, pushed

the couch up next to Josie's bed and stayed there.

Two ladies from the Social Care team came to visit. They had a quick look round the house, then sat down with Frank to put together a care plan.

'What do you mean by a care plan, exactly?' asked Frank.

'Well,' said the older of the two ladies, 'we can put measures in place to help out. It can be very difficult – challenging – to manage this all by yourself.'

'For some, maybe,' said Frank, 'but I can look after Josie.'

The lady smiled. 'I'm sure you're doing everything you can, Frank. And you're doing a really good job, really good, we can see that. But we have to look after you too, don't we? We can help out in all sorts of ways – daycare facilities, where she can be picked up and dropped off, someone to come and do the housework, meals – however you might need supporting.'

'Thank you, but I think we'll be alright.'

'I'm sure you will be, and no one's insinuating any different at all – you're doing a great job here – but sometimes that little break, even a couple of hours, can do you the world of good. Let you recharge your batteries, so to speak, then you're all geared up for when she comes home. And it gives Josie an opportunity to make some friends, start some new hobbies, too, doesn't it?'

Frank didn't answer that, but the lady seemed to think he had.

'Well,' she said, 'you never know. But the opportunity is there, anyway.'

'Also,' the younger one chipped in, fishing in her bag for the appropriate leaflet, 'it might seem a bit soon, and we're not suggesting this is something you need to be worrying about now, but it's best to be prepared, and you might want to start to have a think about longer term care, just in case. Daffodil House isn't too far away, and it's an absolutely lovely place.'

'So's Southport,' said Frank, 'but I'm not sending her there either.'

The ladies left soon after, leaving him with a list of phone numbers and some more leaflets.

'But Dad,' said Susan later, when he told her, 'they're only doing their job. She's in the system now, after the fall and everything, so you'll get priority on a place if you need one. And do you remember Lorraine? My friend from school? She works there, at Daffodil House. I'm still in touch with her, on Facebook. She's been there ever since she left college, so it must be nice if she's stayed all that time. She's nice, Lorraine. I always got on with her. And you might not want to admit it, but you will need help at some point.'

'Not yet, though,' he said. 'Not yet.'

Not when Josie started to forget his name and he brought a wedding photo of them downstairs from the bedroom to show her. Not when she poured her tea all over the green rug next to her bed because she said he was trying to poison her. Not even when she told him she couldn't eat a whole tree without jam on it, and my oh my what a palaver when there's dog shit in the bath. 'Do you like dog

shit?' she asked. 'It's all over that bloody bath.'

Frank never left her alone now, except for the hour on Thursday mornings, to do his launderette run. He did try one more time to use the washing machine at home but she screamed when she heard it start to spin. He made use of the fact that she'd become almost obsessed with her *Strictly Come Dancing* DVD, demanding it repeatedly, smiling and waving to her friends, her very best friends, the lovely sausages, as they twirled in never-ending tangos across the screen. On Thursdays, he'd make sure she'd used the commode, then he was able to set her up with a cup of tea, start the DVD, put an economy wash in at the launderette, and, while he was waiting for it, and because he'd registered for online shopping and home delivery with Tesco now, managed to get half an hour in Cosy Corner Café with a cup of tea, a toasted teacake, and his newspaper. Life got smaller while things got bigger.

So no, he hadn't needed any help at all, until this very Thursday morning when Josie paused the *Strictly Come Dancing* DVD, changed back into her nightie, took her teeth out, turned the gas burner on without lighting it, and left through the back door and the side gate. And at that point, as he'd stood on the landing, in the house without Josie in it, for the first time in his life Frank hadn't known what to do.

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The Manchester Anthology is a collection of poetry and prose written and published by students of The University of Manchester's Centre for New Writing. The stories gathered here take place in the homes of grieving parents replacing lost children with dolls and in the shadow of giant's bones that harbour nightmarish revenants and kindly trolls. They find their characters in dusty hotel rooms around severed heads and traipsing through thick jungles after cosmic horrors. These pieces span genre and style, capturing the diverse voices and skills of each contributor and offer a unique glimpse into the latest contemporary writing.