

THE
2020
MANCHESTER
ANTHOLOGY

After the big...
The voice was...
I saw him...
He caught...
The most recent...
voice reached...
of the...
the...
he stopped...
go

ust the one other alien hunter she'd ever met to be
hley pub he asked if Matthew and I might like to
metal and body odour. He releases the poker face
and is there anything to report like last week?
der the light of a single candle. You are
, and what am I to do when my wife loves them
It is deep enough that when we drop the stone it takes thirty-two seconds to
inning room. Beyond the tornado (you're becoming), you hear the other things, those
to your right is a gleaming statue of Ghand, forever

Even when the world is stranger than fiction,
literature will always offer an escape.

This anthology is from twenty-two writers who refused to let a divided world divide them. From a young woman's journey across the sea, through mazes created by troubled minds, to the cold platform at St Peter's Square, these pieces will carry you across time, through cities known and unknown. The authors within these printed pages play with perspective, genre and form, marking the world with their many voices.

**'Funny, sad, horrible, different, this anthology is a
way of seeing; photographs without a camera.'**

Jeanette Winterson

**'The work gathered here is an uncomplicated
pleasure. These writers are a sign of the new
beginnings we are looking for.'**

John McAuliffe



@mancanthology

www.mancanthology.com

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Centre
for **New**
Writing

MANY

The 2020 Manchester Anthology

Centre for **New** **Writing**

MANY: The 2020 Manchester Anthology

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Foreword

On a page, even centuries hence, 2020 will catch the mind's eye like 1914, like 1929, like 1945 and 2001. Already, its doubled syllables toll with the awful resonance of history in its turning. Opening this anthology, a reader of the future will be aware that everything was changing now. Some of the work here was written before the pandemic struck, some as it took humanity in its grip. Published in the wake of the first wave of the coronavirus, all of *MANY's* poems and stories belong to a new, changed world. It is well titled. 2020 is the year of many: the numbers of cases, the numbers of deaths, the numbers not infected; it is the year of the awareness of the danger of being one among so many; of the realisation of sharing so much with so many; of the experience of being largely the *same* as so many. And 2020 is the year of need and desire, felt by so many, for wholesale change – change now, not deferred – in so many areas of life. Our reader of the future, settling down with *MANY*, will be aware that whatever else it was, this was an astonishing time to be an emerging writer.

These strange times, these scary times, keep safe, we said and wrote to one another. Forces of fear, safety and companionship play powerfully in *MANY*. Throughout, the reader will find the collapse of structures, and the arising, often, of new fierce things. The borders and overlaps between

life and death are explored in prose by Paige Johnston and Georgia Hase, in the poetry of India-Rose Channon and the nonfiction of Rose Amelia Kelly. In Joss Areté Kelvin's piece, we move between consciousness and, possibly, post-traumatic psychosis. A child faces a soldier, a 'War Hawk' in the ruins of a civilisation, in the first chapter of C.A. Hannan's novel. In Luca Zedda's short fiction, a stranger arrives in a village, with dreadful consequences. An ironic and apparently indestructible victim is tortured in RDM Whittaker's dark fantasy; several writers deal with doubling, with matched, mismatched or opposed pairs, and with the currents that run between ourselves and our others, as in the vivid *Divine* by Mary Trend (shades of early Bret Easton Ellis), in the Atwoodian *What Stays Under* by Shannon Benson and in the tremendous, longing poetry of Elenia Graf and Moli Lloyd Evans. *MANY* is stalked and haunted, by bear skinwalkers in E F McAdam's novel extract, by a femme fabulously fatale in Joseph Hunter's *The Birds That Are Caught*, by possibly ghost twins in the work of Channon and Trend. C K Wetton explores the way language is animated by different discourses, making poetry from the dictions of cartography, entomology and management-speak.

It will be fascinating to see which books and authors of the recent past will speak most tellingly to writers of the near future. If Margaret Atwood's readers might feel at home in Shannon Benson's story, then Denis Johnson's fans would surely enjoy Leona Storey's *Maple*, while readers of Tibor Fischer and Iain M. Banks will relish the cynical mermaid narrator and her world created by Probert Dean. Followers of the fiction of Elena Ferrante will want to know what happens next in Kathryn Tann's *Until We Arrive*, while Rose from Danielle Elliott's *A Rose from Dust* and the narrator of Erin MacNamara's *What the Fire Gave Me*, who is accused of

witchcraft, would find places in Clarissa Pinkola Estés' classic anthology, *The Women Who Run with the Wolves*. Rose Tremain of *The Road Home* would admire James Brady's take on family and immigration in *Proud Titania*; our times speak through the poetry of Georgia Way: following Louis Aragon's *Ce* she writes, 'On the road to Aleppo I heard / how a country's song can change...'

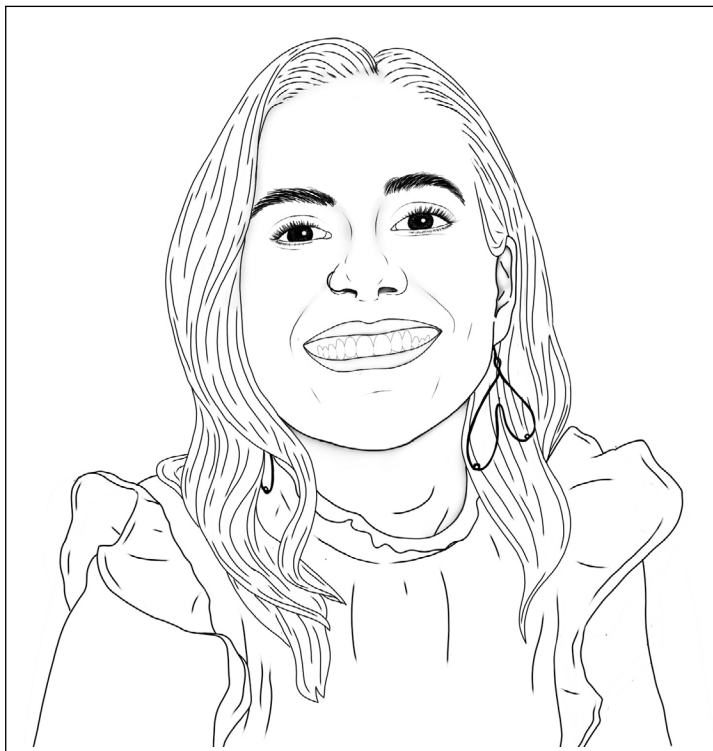
We have all heard that song, and its changing, now. The voices and characters here speak of a generation of writers whose concerns range from the universal (the heart-breaking portrait of her father's dying by Rose Amelia Kelly) to the very particular. In Elenia Graf's poetry, 'girls like us walk with calculated steps': we hear the footfalls of the formerly marginal striding towards their rightful place in the mainstream of social discourse. The polluted oceans speak through Probert Dean's writing, children of war through C.A. Hannan's, a woman in acute mental distress through Joss Areté Kelvin's. The seeds of the future, with its border-crossers, its doubling and inter-twining, with its broken binaries and remade pasts, are here, are distinct and tangible, in *MANY*.

Teaching creative writing, I tell students that publishers and agents do not always know what kinds of forms and what sorts of voices and stories will attract readers (though they always know what has) and that they can scent good writing in a few lines, and know it for certain within page or two. I envy anyone looking for new talent who turns this page and reads to the end of this anthology: you cannot miss! And I am certain that our reader of the future will have the huge pleasure, here, of finding early work by writers and poets whose names will be well known to them. A daunting aspect of the literary world, for new writers, is the feeling of supplication: in order to reach the public, you need agents'

readers, agents and publishers to give your work time and attention. But the thrill of the work in *MANY* is the unmistakeable sense that there are writers here whose time is coming, whose voices we need to hear. I commend them all to you. In these pages you will discover an abundantly talented generation, bursting with originality and promise.

Horatio Clare 2020

Georgia Hase



When asked what she wanted to be, a young Georgia Hase said she'd go to university, study English Literature and become an author (adult Georgia is rather envious of her confidence). Despite being briefly tempted away by Geography (she soon realised how much maths would be involved), she quickly

returned to books and writing: step one complete (with a First no less).

Georgia chose Manchester for her MA because the course offered modules in poetry, fiction and non-fiction. Having previously been more interested in poetry, she was excited to try prose in its various iterations. In the short-lived time when live events were a thing, Georgia enjoyed writing for the Manchester Review (post MA, Georgia will definitely continue exploring the world of non-fiction). Her themes range from magical realism to horror to a more realist perspective (basically, she hides her indecisiveness by trying as many avenues as possible).

This short story is part of a wider collection she is working on. All the stories are written from a female perspective and explore the connection between the female body and psyche, from erotomania to anorexia.

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The Wrong Forecast

The weather forecast was wrong the day Dr. Harmon told me about you. *Clear skies with a light south-westerly wind, only a five percent chance of rain.* Normally I would've stood in front of my kitchen window and watched the clouds. I would've checked for frost, for rain, for sun, my chamomile tea warming my hands, its steam unfurling towards the ceiling. But thanks to Luke switching off my alarm (apparently I needed the sleep), I'd been running behind my planned schedule all day. I didn't have time to check the clouds that morning and blamed the BBC for my decision to leave my umbrella in its ceramic stand by my front door. My favourite suede shoes, heavy with the rain that wasn't supposed to have fallen, squeaked on the linoleum floor as I walked to Dr. Harmon's room. When she first gave me a tissue from the box on her desk, it was to wipe away the water trickling from my hairline into my eyes. The second tissue caught the tears that fell when she said you were growing inside me.

You would've been so small that Wednesday afternoon. Smaller than a fingernail, smaller than the freckle on my left nipple, and yet, when I knew you were there, it was like I could feel you. Each cell forming, dividing, growing. At 41, thanks to regular Pilates classes, fruit instead of chocolate, and only the occasional glass of red, my stomach was, if not firm, then definitely flat. But with the tissues scrunched

between my fingers, and my palm on my stomach, it didn't feel so flat anymore. How could it? It was now a house to one tiny, rapidly developing occupant. You.

Dr. Harmon gave me several leaflets, booked in my next appointment, asked if I had any questions. I had thousands. But with my toes curled against damp suede, my left hand on my stomach, and my right hand full of tissues and leaflets, my questions dissolved before they could be asked. As I walked through the too-bright waiting room, the squeak of my shoes was obnoxiously loud. I gripped my leaflets tighter; the squeaking got faster. I didn't look up as I walk-ran to my car. I slammed the door on the rain and threw the tissues and leaflets on the passenger seat. I tried to breathe, felt my breath hiccup in my throat, once, twice. By the sixth I was fixing my mascara in the rear-view mirror. I smiled at my reflection; told myself what Mum told me the day Dad left: *we'll get through this. You'll see.* By the time I pulled up to my drive, I'd ripped my thumb nail down to the bed. The stinging helped me focus, or rather it kept me distracted. I just had to make a plan. I sat at the kitchen table and smoothed flat the leaflets, got my good pen and my good paper (the ruled kind, 120 gsm – only the best for you). I sucked at my thumb to stop the blood seeping onto my clothes – blood stains are such a nuisance. We could do this. I could do this.

I'm good at research, always have been, it's what I do three days a week for Luke's firm. Made it easy to fit around your appointments. Luke thought I should stop working, reduce the stress to my body. What does he know? After sixteen years he still struggles to find my G-spot. It's not like it's moved. When he suggested I give up work, I laughed more than I had for months; it wasn't part of my plan to give up working, never was. Besides, all the websites and articles had suggested keeping to a normal routine. They recommended

removing unhealthy and sugary foods, said adding daily walks would help stimulate blood flow and, of course, that occasional glass of red was the first to go.

Three mornings after we found out about you, Luke joined me in the kitchen. He took the mug of chamomile tea, which had been burning my palms in the most pleasant way, and placed it onto the counter with a soft clink. Then he turned my face away from the window, away from the clouds, towards him. He took my hands, rubbing his thumb in small circles against my skin. His hands smelt of cocoa butter and, as they were still slightly slippery from applying moisturiser, they struggled to hold tight to mine.

‘How about we call our families round and tell them together?’ he said. ‘What do you think?’

I had wanted to wait a bit before telling anyone. Maybe speak to Dr. Harmon again, maybe just sit with you under some clouds, but I did like how efficient Luke’s idea was. Besides, I suspected Luke wanted to speak to his mother about you, and my mum would be furious to know I kept you from her. So, on the Sunday after Dr. Harmon first told me about you, our families all crammed into our perfect-for-two living room. My mum and sister sat on our cerulean velvet sofa, Luke’s mother perched in the single armchair next to our oak bookshelf. His father stood, muttering under his breath by the window. The clouds behind him were of the cumulus variety – the white cotton balls would look spectacular come sunset. Luke’s brother and his husband sat on the floor with their three year old son, Tom. Tom’s fingers were sticky from God knows what, and I winced as he flattened his small hands on my Persian rug.

I almost laughed when we told them about you. There was the expected shock; Luke’s father was silent for once. Then came the tears. Big fat tears spilled down my mum’s and

sister's cheeks, dropped onto the sofa. Where they fell, the cerulean dappled to navy. Then they were all hugging us, squeezing so hard my back clicked. It seemed almost fake, a performance straight out of a movie. I half expected a director to yell 'cut'. Only Tom seemed real to me, still on the floor, trying to smoosh his grubby little fingers into the yellow fibres of my rug.

I think Sarah, my sister, thought Luke and I were divorcing. I always called her after we fought, that occasional glass of red turning into a bottle, sometimes more. On those days, she'd remind me that if I needed help stashing a body, her rotting vegetable patch was always available, saying that's what big sisters are for. It's funny how your arrival fixed things that had been broken for so long. Luke was touching me again, finding any excuse to hold me, kiss me. When we talked, we talked about you. Not about work, or taxes, or who'd forgotten to buy milk – again.

Mum started calling me every day after we told her. Our conversations centred on you, though Sarah did get the occasional mention: 'Sarah came round yesterday. She said she was there to see me, but really she just stole my green turtleneck again. I'm going to have to put that jumper under bloody lock and key.' Sometimes a call was not sufficient for her and she'd join me on my daily walk. She'd tut at the state of my nails, mark my breathing and the flush in my cheeks. If she ever felt I was overexerting myself, we'd return home for tea and biscuits. She prefers the chocolate ones, I favour a custard cream, but we always argue over whether to dunk or not. Mum's pro-dunking. I think it makes tea disgusting, bits of soggy biscuit swimming around, no thanks.

The next time I saw Dr. Harmon, the scan showed you'd grown to about the size of a walnut. Luke got the morning off work to come with me, said we were in this together. I knew

he was trying to be supportive. If I checked his iPad search history, I'm sure I'd find bookmarked articles on "how to be an empathetic partner". But it's not his body you're growing in, it's mine. Besides, he wasn't much company – kept complaining about how uncomfortable hospital chairs are, no lumbar support apparently. At least the forecast had been correct: *cloudy and mild throughout much of the day, heavy showers expected early evening in the South*. Even though the rain hadn't fallen until later that day, the grey clouds meant my umbrella was under my chair and my new suede shoes were at home. When Dr. Harmon told us I was further along than she thought, Luke gripped my hand to stop me biting my nails. My fingers flexed between his and I pulled at the dry skin of my lips instead. Luke has always hated my nervous habit. Mum tried to stop me doing it by using that vile tasting varnish, but I learnt to quite like the taste.

Our appointment didn't last long, and outside Dr. Harmon's door I shared a small smile with a woman who was sitting on one of the plastic chairs in the waiting room. Luke held my hand the entire drive home; I don't think he'd have let go even if we'd had a manual car and he'd had to shift gears. It would've been nice if his hands hadn't been sweaty. He didn't want to go back to work after he dropped me at home. The skin around his eyes was scrunched up in concern. He needn't have worried; I knew what to do. After he checked for the fifth time that I would *definitely* be ok, he kissed me goodbye and reversed the car back out of the drive.

I think before that appointment I'd thought of you as more of an abstract possibility than a real eventuality. But Dr. Harmon's face as Luke held my hand told me you were growing quickly, and we weren't ready.

I was surprised to see Luke when he got home late that evening, I hadn't realised it was almost nine. I'd been

packing my things for almost ten hours – it would've been longer, but I'd had to go and buy the boxes. I was in the living room, surrounded by boxes that had spilled out into the kitchen. I loved our place. It was small, but it was ours. We bought it ten years ago, chose it for its proximity to work, its quiet middle class neighbours. One bedroom, a kitchen, a living room, and a garden that backs onto Richmond Park. Perfection. I would miss it; miss the eggshell walls, miss seeing the deer pick their way through the park. Luke was silent while I showed him the boxes and their labels. I explained how each one was colour coordinated by room. He needed to understand my system. He took the alphabetical list I gave him, glanced at it only once before he placed it on one of the boxes, the one marked *bedroom* in purple pen. When he started shushing me, I realised I'd been shouting, my volume raised over the sobs that had bubbled in my chest. You had made me cry again, and I really didn't like crying. He grabbed my hands. I got blood on him then. I hadn't even realised I was bleeding. I'd been biting my nails again. When I looked at the boxes, smears of blood rimmed where I'd taped them, the red drops ruining my colour system. I knew Luke wanted to say something, his lips were pressed together so tightly they'd puckered white. But he didn't let out the words that were probably hot on his tongue. Instead he pulled me close, my back against his chest, and wrapped his arms around me. His hands were warm where they rested on you.

Before you, he might've said something, but his bookmarked articles probably suggested just being quiet, being there for what *I* needed. Where was this Luke before you arrived? Before you, I'm sure our arguments had been the talk of the street, our decision to move to a quiet neighbourhood coming back to bite us. But we'd been

together for years and you don't just throw something like that away. Besides, we had you to think about now. You had carved out a space in our lives that stole all our attention, good and bad.

It was nothing but clear skies the day the vomiting started. If I had looked out of the bathroom window, I might've seen two plane contrails crisscross to form a white 'x' in the sky, I might've seen a hot air balloon, I might've seen Santa-fucking-Claus fly past, but all I saw was the bleached off-white of a toilet bowl. It got so bad I made a nest out of blankets and towels so I wouldn't have far to go before my intestines made a run for it up my gullet. The cool pinpricks in the centre of my forehead and the blush vanishing from my cheeks were the only warnings my body deigned to give me before I'd be on my knees, hugging the toilet like I was adrift at sea, heaving and heaving and heaving. Cooled mugs of chamomile tea surrounded me like a ceramic fairy ring, Luke's offering of comfort when he didn't know what else to do. It was so bad that Mum came around on the days Luke was at work. She rubbed my back in clockwise circles, singing the made-up songs she'd sung to my sister and me as children.

*Two little girls flew on a swing,
one went up, one went down.
up and down
went the pretty little girls
so high and so fast
they even grew wings.*

The circular hand motion actually made me feel worse, but I didn't tell her that, enjoying being cared for like a child again. The times I was alone and wasn't vomiting, I'd lay with

my forehead pressed against our cool tiled floor and pull my knees as close to my chin as I could. I'd lay there and cup my stomach, cup you.

Is it weird that I haven't named you? When Sarah and I met at the pub (a pint of Hogstar for her, soda and lime for me), she said I should call you The Beast, because of what you were doing to my body. I thought about it when she went outside to smoke. I watched her through the window, red flaring at her mouth. Sarah's smoking started young. She preferred to be out with her friends, stealing lipsticks from Woolworths and sharing damp cigarettes with the boys from the year above, than staying home with me to listen to Mum and Dad fight. At lunch last week, Mum used *my condition* to try for the hundredth time to get Sarah to quit. She'd clearly failed. I watched as the clouds behind Sarah hurried through the air. I could see her shiver, despite her green turtleneck. The Beast might've been more of an official name, but I suppose *you* is still a name of sorts; it straddles the line between accusatory and affectionate. It lets me address you, you who are now the size of a peach.

The radio had been saying all week that there was a cold front coming to the UK from across the Atlantic, bringing the potential conditions for heavy snow. On Friday, I saw frosted grass and the darkening sky through the kitchen window, so I had my fluffy socks and gloves at the ready. On my way to work I overheard several groups of school children talking, hoping for the most treasured weather phenomenon; snow. Their breaths mingled in warm clouds above their hatted heads; they were all excitable, giggling at the likely prospect of days spent at home building snowmen. I understood that they were excited, but did they have to walk so slowly? I tried to slip between them, but they had linked arms and spanned the width of the pavement. I sucked my left cheek in and bit

down to keep from saying something I'd most likely regret. Instead I stepped down onto the road to overtake them.

My right foot was in the road, my left still on the curb, when you decided to make yourself known. It felt like you had grabbed hold of my insides and were ripping and tearing at them with thousands of sharp little knives. I think I might have screamed; I definitely fell, the back of my skull connecting with the curb with a loud smack that vibrated my jaw, clicking my teeth together. I know now that I was concussed. At the time, it was like everything had slowed. The children were asking me if I was ok, and I wanted to say yes, say that I was fine, but the words slurred into a formless sound. The back of my head was feeling warm when an adult joined the hatted heads looking down at me. I tried to sit up, but the woman, I remember she had curly black hair and wasn't wearing a hat, placed a hand on my shoulder to keep me down. I remember the sky; the clouds had merged to form a nimbostratus and the blue lights of the ambulance arrived when the first snowflake caught in a strand of the woman's hair, the white stark against the black. The radio weather forecast had been right.

I'd done my research; I knew what that intensity of pain meant. Dr Harmon didn't need to tell me, though she did. See, not content to stay in my cervix, you'd spread yourself across my uterus, to my lymph nodes, stretching as far as my lungs. Aggressive little thing, aren't you? Luke went quite grey when he heard, Sarah and my mum each gripped one of my hands. I was surprised that I cared more about not being able to get at my nails than I did about what Dr. Harmon was saying. I kept silent, let my mum do the arguing, ask the questions.

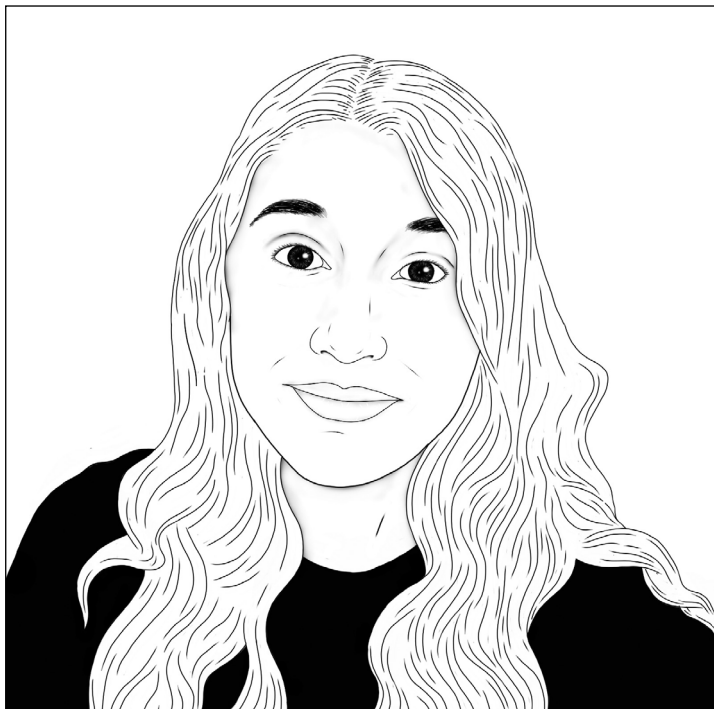
'There must be other options!'

But there weren't. Chemo hadn't killed you and you'd

spread too far to operate. I could hear Dr. Harmon trying to placate my family. I wonder how much of her job is actually about dealing with the patient's family. Mine certainly weren't going to make it easy. I winced when Sarah's hand tightened around my own. When I turned to look at her, I saw that she was crying soft, silent tears. They ran down her cheeks in such perfect rivulets, they belonged on a film set. Mum's cheeks and neck were flushing red, her grip on my hand becoming painful, her voice getting louder – poor Dr. Harmon. Luke was shaking his head, quiet 'no's' making it past his lips to my ears. It seems the articles he'd read could only prepare him so much. I wanted to say, *save something for when I'm gone*, but I don't think they'd have appreciated my attempt at humour (though Sarah might've). Instead I looked out of the window.

The clouds had thickened while I'd been out, eddies of snow now swirled in the wind. Sarah and I used to love catching snowflakes on our tongue. She'd told me they were magic sweets and, if we ate enough, we'd become magic too.

India-Rose Channon



India-Rose Channon is a poet, fiction author and song writer who mostly writes queer stories. She is interested in not only exploring queer experiences, but also experiences of domestic abuse, and sexism within medicine. She believes that these are issues that can and should be explored in all forms of writing, from poetry to YA fantasy novels to literary fiction.

India comes from West Yorkshire and finds her inspiration in the rugged, wild countryside and local folklore of the area. She is interested in all forms of oral storytelling, especially collaborative storytelling. Her poetry is influenced by local spoken word lore, and the fantasy and science fiction genres.

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📷 @inkyrosey

Cynthia

She said she had to go and so she left, and what am I to do
when my wife loves the moon? When she walks in the garden
footprints in the grass spring up in her wake,
when she cries it only wets the plants that keep her
earthbound.

She stood beside the bed, the window open wide
and pressed her face to the wind like glass to a cutting wheel.
Love, tell me how to stop a woman with her arms already out
the door,
what string can I buy to keep her still and tethered to my
fingers?

I know I shouldn't ask the moon to keep us safe.
I watched her close the door behind her and I asked
that the way ahead be easy as the rose grows in our beds,
and the way to me be marked out by a thread spun out of stars.

Examination

The sheet is white as summer laundry and crinkles
when I climb up on the bed, bow-legged and naked
from the waist down. I want to smooth it out like a
tablecloth
at Christmas, press the ripples into submission with the
palms
of my hands, tame them. I am not a good hostess.
My elbows are sharp at my sides, I don't know how to
soften,
maybe I never have, my knees, my eyes, my voice, my belly.

She splays my legs, I press them close and she splays them
again,
and when she touches me, I feel it across the webbing
of my body, a thousand thousand gloved fingers
pushing into me from all angles. Nothing

grows in my belly, though I am made for it.
You could plant potatoes in my fingernails
and they would grow, tendrils tethered on my arms.
You could feed me apples and watch the tree
burst from my stomach, bloodied branches gathered
over me. *Any chance you're pregnant?* she says.
I tell her *no* and beg my body to believe me.

Firebird

Light spools like thread/she said heaven is empty and all
the light is here/I said heaven never existed in the first
place/she held my hand all the same/my hands are see-
through in the day/pink on white/rivers of gold run over
my bones/smoothing/wearing my knuckles to dice/roll my
bones across her table top/the wood is the colour of the noise
bees make and it has splinters/she has splinters/she is good
at sharing her splinters/the light fractures and we pick it up
between our fingers/spillikins/do not touch one another/do
not let the light leach from my skin to hers/she smells like
sulphur/she has a boyfriend/smells of suncream when my
curtains are open/I can see the smears on the glass/I can see
her on the street/open wide/ I would let her swallow me if
she wanted to/the sky cries copper and she eats it up

Water House

It is deep enough that when we drop the stone
it takes thirty-two seconds to hit the bottom
and echo its findings back up to us. The old station
is flooded, the pumps rusted into place,
the hole where the witch lives smells like mulch.

The witch can't speak. You put on a voice for her,
run bark over your throat so your voice comes out old
as the forest, you place a curse on us like the curse
on this place, wish us drowned and floating,
and when you laugh the hole laughs too.

Later, when you're called home for potatoes
and warmth and bathtime, I take off my shoes,
feel the damp ooze into my skin. Climb
back into the darkness, splash-land in the deep,
curl up in my corner and wait for your return.

The Sun Rises A Sixteenth Time

Light again on the hard, round brink of Earth,
brims a white blue line, a star in an upset teacup,
the sun rises for the last time today.

We float in our station, in our white suits,
watch the planet far below, or above, as light spills
over our mountains and oceans.

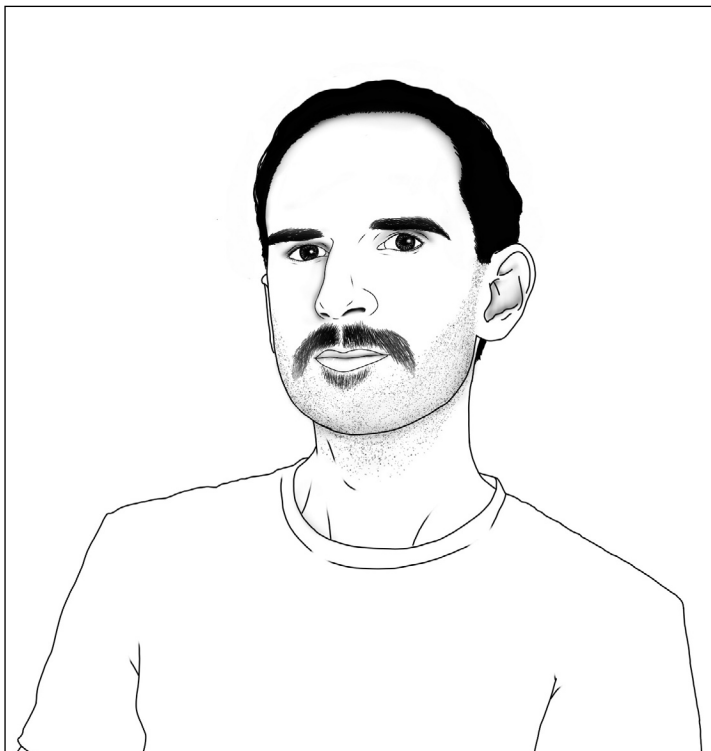
Cuts lines through black with wicked sharp
fabric scissors, lets the gold run through.
Space is mended sheets in our hands,

pulled taut on a washing line, we can only watch
as the gaps are pulled apart, and the white heart
rises above the earth, white as old stories

passed down from lips to ear,
white as small lies like hanging teeth,
white as a belly before fingers lay lines

of red down. There is no air here to blur
the edges, there are no words and whispers to change
the story, there is only one more dawn.

Probert Dean



Probert Dean is from Liverpool. His short fiction, such as it is, has appeared in *Mechanic's Institute Review*, *Stupefying Stories* and others. He was recently 6th place in Writer's Digest competition.

He is currently studying MA Creative Writing at University of Manchester, redrafting an autobiographical science fiction novel,

and writing a new novel about Marxist-Satanists. He composes and performs for the avant-garde punk band Unstoppable Sweeties Show.

On his days off he likes to work part-time in an office.

'Her Lady Ship' is a slipstream short story written specifically for the *Manchester Anthology 2020*. In it, a cynical mermaid finds an opportunity to escape her human captors.

Read on, but take heed – there be monsters in these seas.

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Her Lady Ship

The human wife glares as they wheel me up to the drawbridge. Glares more as her people, blacktrousers mainly, part to let me through. The looming castle eclipses the heavens – an amorphous, gargoyled shadow against the night. Finely ground gems are embedded in the stone, so the walls glisten like ersatz stars in the corner of my eye. In the distance, the men are dismantling siege weapons and singing (though their songs sound more like football chants).

Her Ladyship hobbles towards me, poking her tongue into her cheek whenever she puts weight on the injured leg. I hope it's hurt badly. She sticks a jewel-speckled hand into my tank and pulls out mine, which she kisses so hungrily I half expect her to take me right there with the human wife still glaring.

The human wife turns to glare at the nearest distraction instead – a portcullis – but I can glean her thoughts from the vein in her neck, throbbing its little morse-code fuck you. She thinks I must feel very important being wheeled around like this.

The opposite is true. This contraption, my little tank on wheels, may be gilded but it is still a cage. A crystal fishbowl. I'd renounce all my servants, all my jewellery, even cigarettes, to soar once again through the pelagic depths. Here, in the world of sky, you can't fly. Some swim along the ground but I've never tried it – apparently it isn't seemly for a refined mermaid (their term) to writhe around on the floor like a worm.

‘What a glorious night for victory,’ says Her Ladyship, which is what we call her now her name has been erased from history. ‘Look. The moon reddens to honour us. Yes, blushing maiden, we may have lost 200, but the fish lost thrice that.’

While the Earth’s shadow has indeed dimmed her the colour of sangria, the moon doesn’t look like she gives any more of a shit than she usually does. I pull myself over the rim, splashing water over everyone’s shoes, and pop a cigarette in my mouth. A soldier, wincing from wet feet, lights it for me. I blacken my little fish lungs while our glorious leader, my beloved wife, talks of flanks shattered and cuirasses pierced, of silver plundered and merwomen taken.

That’s how they got me, of course, five long years ago. I wouldn’t come up here voluntarily, even though the seas are full of plastic six-pack rings, abandoned shopping trolleys and – my favourite – sewage. A mouthful of sewage would be like sweet nectar compared to a kiss from Her Ladyship. She’s all tongue and usually tastes like a venti cappuccino.

Halfway through my cigarette, a man, some haughty land-mammal in uniform, snatches it and stubs it out under his boot. Apparently it’s time to go inside. The indoor smoking ban is one of the few remaining relics of civilisation and they won’t give it up easily.

Yesterday, this entire castle was under water. The humans have drained away an entire estuary just to capture it. The stone is still black with moisture, the grass is beaded with salt-dew, and all over the former seabed fish are flopping, wondering if this is hell.

We follow Her Ladyship through the portcullis, into a hall so large that every drip from the ceiling sounds like a bongo drum, and every splashing puddle like a wave hitting the beach. Shifting lava lamps and bioluminescent jellyfish throw multicoloured shadows across the floor. This is a mermaid’s

castle: the walls are golden sand, the soft furnishings are a rainbow of coral, and everything from the curtains to the mirrors is embellished with shells and starfish.

And they say we're primitive.

'Through here, Your Ladyship,' says a soldier, and she and her guards stomp through a doorway.

The human wife and I, relegated to the back of the queue, each try not to be the last one in.

'After me,' she says, in faux-politeness, and barges past before my pusher can get any momentum behind my wheels.

At least with him wheeling me around I am never the last to enter.

This was probably a storeroom. It's empty now, post-siege, apart from a solitary sea-cucumber lying shrunken and silty in the corner.

Three merwomen wait, shackled on the floor. The one in the middle is cradling the heads of the other two on her shoulders like a holy painting. She looks just like the figurine on Her Ladyship's war table, with the same brown-jewelled tiara on her head, only she is far prettier in full-size. No, wait, I must stop thinking like the terfolk. She looks like a hero should, toned and muscular, with her tail curled in defiance, and an intelligence in her eyes like that of several minds burning at once.

'Now,' says Her Ladyship. 'Are you going to be good little fish?'

The three merwomen nod. Our leader snatches the brown-jewelled tiara and examines it. The blacktrousers, too, seem mighty impressed by it.

'Zigra,' she snaps, and I am wheeled forwards because I am Zigra.

'Hello,' I say, but I pronounce it 'yello', which I know annoys Her Ladyship.

‘That siren in the middle. That is Rahab, yes? Tell me you recognise her.’

The merwoman’s eyes meet mine and instinct makes me break eye-contact.

‘Well?’ says Her Ladyship.

This time I hold her gaze. We become one mind. She can smell my thoughts – and I know because I can smell hers too, though unlike mine there is no whiff of helplessness, no pungent undertone of fear. I know then that she intends to rescue all of us. I open my mouth to speak, to announce that I’ve never met the rebel Rahab, but, before I can, she gives me the tiniest, barely visible of nods, and, for a microsecond, a wistful plea glistens in her porcelain eyes.

I’m the only one who sees any of this.

‘That’s Rahab alright,’ I say.

Her Ladyship claps her hands. Then the words are pouring out of her like gunk from an outfall pipe. She’s telling her slavemaster to do a tally of the remaining mermen, and her guard captain to see that there is no fighting over the mermaids. Do this, do that.

‘Help yourselves to these two,’ she says. ‘But Rahab is mine.’

Rahab doesn’t react but I sense her loathing, her inner face scowling. The already tense jaw of the human wife tightens further. She has been warned by the cosmetologist about grinding her teeth.

The blacktrousers look at each other, at the endless liquid motion of the lava lamp, at the twirling ammonite patterns on the ground – anything but Rahab herself. The rebel leader is a dangerous prize to claim, a poisonous blowfish supper. If she doesn’t kill the mistress herself then she’ll probably inspire others to do it.

We live in hope.

*

We sail home by moonlight on what's left of the sea. I spend an hour or so parked up on the deck, the stars and the moon floating in my tank like a little universe. When I close my eyes the breeze is almost like waves of cold seawater rolling over me, my long hair stalks of kelp flapping in my face.

A man arrives and stands before me with the anxious reverence of a servant. He has a handsome scaly face and brilliant black pits for eyes, but since he is nude I look at his face only as an afterthought, glancing first at those muscular thighs.

'Ma'am, I'm your pusher for this evening,' he says.

The males of our species are frequently killed – the terfolk consider them devils and sea monsters – but their bipedal nature makes them useful for degrading jobs like cleaning, or retail. My merman pushers are rotated once per night. This is to stop them falling in love, which the humans, in their mermaidophilia, their ocean fever, consider inevitable (and it's inconceivable to them that I could fall for such a glass-eyed, sharp-toothed hunk as this).

'What's your name?' I ask.

'Moby,' he says. 'What would you have me do, ma'am?'

I want to lean over and kiss those thighs, which look strong enough to crush a head.

'Take the night off, sir. But first I'd like to find the rebel Rahab. I saw some soldiers escorting her near the lazarette. I'd like to go there.'

'If you please, ma'am, I'm grateful for you addressing me such – no one has ever called me sir – but it's not quite correct.'

'Nothing wrong with a bit of fish solidarity,' I say.

'No, it's just that I'm a merwoman.'

I apologise and apologise again, but Moby forgives. She understands that I've begun to think in terfolk terms, lumping all the algae-coloured bipeds under mermen and all the caudal, smooth-skinned ones under merwomen. How could I let them infect my words?

'Lots of merwomen,' says Moby, as she rolls me to the hatch. 'Once they've been married to powerful humans for a while, start thinking themselves above the rest of us.'

'Yes,' I say, knowing I've been guilty of that.

'You and I are sisters,' she says with a sudden change. Her eyes, dismissed as vacant by the humans, shine with teary passion.

The ramp to the lower deck creaks so loudly that I fear it'll split open, swallowing us into a salty abyss. We do not have boats where I come from – I am quite literally out of my depth. The air tastes like rotten wood and the rocking carbonates my stomach fluids. Moby is very careful with me, gripping my tank so I don't roll away or spill any water when the floor lurches under us.

Near Her Ladyship's quarters, where Her Ladyship has already retired for the night, we pass a group of people. Beyond the shadows I see the human wife, dressed in the finest human clothes, all cut to accentuate her legs. Those are, after all, the main thing I don't have. Two officers escort her to the door, then she waves them away and slips inside. When she sees me, she flashes a look of magnanimous triumph – this is her night.

She can have it, and every other.

As the guards march away, one says to the next 'Why didn't Her Ladyship send for the new wife?'

'Rahab?' says the other. 'Too bitey and scratchy.'

We continue through the dripping dark to Rahab's cabin. Two blacktrousers are guarding her compartment. One of

them is small but has a face fond of cruelty. The other is large enough to plug a doorway. I'll have to seem submissive, so as not to pose a challenge to their authority, but also not too eager, so as not to rouse their sadism.

'Is the prisoner shackled?' I ask.

'Of course she is.'

'May I speak with her a moment?'

'Why?'

'I heard she was "bitey and scratchy"'. I thought I'd try to explain that marrying a human is a good thing. It will stop her from turning into seafoam, you see.'

The guards obviously think this beneath them. Mermaids and their silly legends.

'Be quick,' one of them says.

When we enter the room we find Rahab curled on a cushion with her hands in manacles. A crimp in her hair goes all the way around her head where the brown-jewelled tiara had been. There's a film playing with subtitles, something about Chinese women in a palace, but I don't think she's watching it. She's listening, I believe, to the music of the ocean.

'Oh good,' she says. 'I was wondering when you were going to come.'

'What?'

'You're Zigra, aren't you? Pleased to meet you, I'm the rebel Rahab. Listen, I need someone to saw through these manacles. Moby here brought me a rusty file earlier but I can't quite manage it myself.'

Something in her voice, songlike and dreamy, makes me obey – like a dancer enthralled to a rhythm. Being chained in a squalid little room has done nothing to dampen Rahab's dinner-party charms. Before Moby can volunteer, and I know she will, I reach over the side of my tank, snatch the file, and

begin sawing the chains. It takes longer than I expect, and I tear two fingernails, but in the end the metal rings hit the floor with a clang and she is free.

‘Those things were killing me,’ she says. ‘Now, time to escape I should think.’

‘This is happening too fast’ I say. ‘We can’t escape, we’re on a boat.’

‘Not fast enough if you ask me,’ she says, picking up a notebook from the table and glancing over the open page. ‘I intend to seize this ship. If it quells any pessimism perhaps I could tell you I’ve done it before?’

‘And have you?’

‘No.’

She laughs, though I don’t find it very funny.

‘Let’s do it,’ says Moby. ‘Even if we die, our martyrdom might inspire others.’

‘That’s the spirit,’ says Rahab. ‘Look at it this way, Zigra. If there were no merfolk or terfolk, and we were all just one or the other, there’d be no misery in the world.’

I think that’s not true, though I don’t say so. If it wasn’t marine versus terrestrial it’d be northern hemisphere versus southern hemisphere, or nocturnal versus diurnal, or something like that.

In my mind, humans are already striking my heart with tasers and truncheons, but I can’t drop the trident now; what would Rahab think of me?

‘What have I gotten myself into?’ I ask.

‘Old mermaid trick,’ says Rahab, with a glint in her eye that could be genius or madness. ‘We crash the ship onto the rocks.’

*

The mutineer melusine has gone, wheeled out in my tank. I've taken her place on the floor, biting my remaining nails and wondering what's going on outside. In the paranoid dress rehearsals of my mind, everything goes wrong: the merfolk are too depressed to rise, the blacktrousers uncover the ruse and kill her. If Rahab harboured any doubts they were oystered away inside her, pearly and secret.

'Fortunately, it's night,' she'd said. 'And terfolk can't tell an Adriatic mermaid from a Caspian.'

When Rahab's screech rings out like a bell I know it's time. There's a clatter outside and something heavy falls over. I open the door a crack and see the guards drawing swords and whistles against two mermen. I lunge at the closest and drag him to the floor, surprised at my own strength. I suppose living in water will do that.

By the time we've manacled the guards, the merfolk are racing above deck, Rahab leading like a figurehead on the bow of a ship, shrieking an assault to enemy eardrums. Some are armed with dinner knives, others planks of wood. I come across a smashed tank – my own, perhaps – and take a sharp piece of glass. I slither after them, throwing open my lungs to join with the deafening war-chorus. A merwoman in front of me has been cut in half by a sword, but there's nothing to do now other than crawl on through blood, to the open deck – to our allies, the rain, the sea.

Slithering is like being born again. It is the most wonderful thing (no, that's swimming, but this is close). With our strong tails and limber arms we outpace even the mermen. I take my first gulp of cold freedom, swimming in wind and starlight.

When a man kicks me in the side I swallow the pain and rise up to head height, flashing my shard of glass so his eyes become moons. The sea growls behind him, hungry for vengeance. Up close the man is an ancient mass of sinews and

rags – never a soldier but probably some kind of mariner. Does that make him a civilian?

‘Can’t believe it, I can’t,’ he says, his voice faint in the din. ‘That mermaid, the one they brought back this morn, only just saw her up close. That’s Monstro, it is.’

‘You mean Rahab,’ I say, stirring the air with the glass so his eyes follow.

‘I know Monstro when I see her. I were only a boy when she sank me first ship. Course you lot don’t age, not like we do. My pa perished in that wreck. I’d never forget the face that did it.’

I tie the old man up, wondering if there is any truth to his story. Meanwhile more terfolk are dragged overboard, and those remaining throw up their hands in surrender. Rahab already has the helmswoman surrounded and is pointing out her course correction, towards the rocks. She looks like the statue of a war hero. Perhaps she really has done this before. I look around the deck, unable to believe that we have succeeded.

‘I only take orders from Her Ladyship,’ says the helm.

‘This is our ship now,’ cries Rahab. ‘And I’m renaming it. How about Her Lady Ship?’

She laughs madly but the helmswoman refuses to capitulate.

‘Fine,’ says Rahab. ‘We’ll figure out how to steer it ourselves. What’s the worst that’ll happen? Drowning, ha! Actually, while we’re on that subject...’

Strong green arms seize the helmswoman and dunk her into a mermaid tank. She kicks and froths and I look away, towards the bow, where another figure is running towards us.

‘Wait,’ shouts the approaching woman.

It’s the human wife, wearing a white slip of a dress. She wobbles as the ship quakes beneath her.

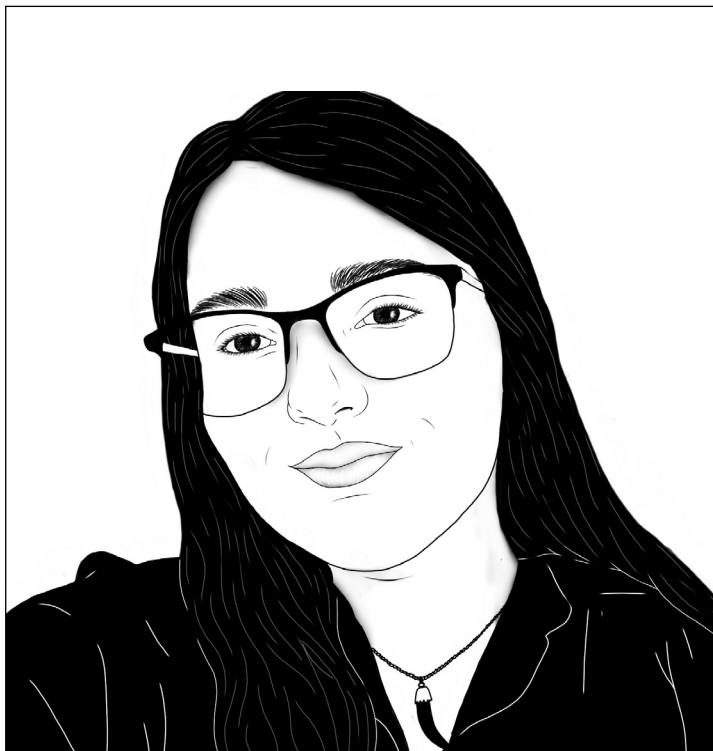
‘Stop the killing,’ she shouts. ‘We surrender.’

Her hands are dribbling blood. Rahab nods to her minion and the helmswoman is released, choking and dribbling, at their feet.

‘You did well, my terrestrial sister,’ says Rahab, and the human wife runs to her side and stands there like a child clinging to its mother. ‘If everyone remains calm this ship will not sink. At least, not tonight.’

There is talk about where we’ll go, of oceans beyond the sunset, lagoons blueing by the sky’s cyanosis, and cooling shadows like little tree-shaped nights. Castles of gold with hearty crimson reefs for carpets, pearls fastened into chandeliers to shine a thousand moonlights. But I hardly listen. There are already ships on the horizon. There always will be. I slither towards the bow. Slithering is one of many freedoms I will learn to enjoy. Moonlight pours out of the parting clouds and turns the sea to marble, and I dive into it.

Paige Johnston



Paige Johnston comes from a small town which she always hated but now, ironically, inspires much of her writing. She now lives in Manchester with her Labrador puppy and ever-growing tea collection. She's a fantasy writer at heart, and loves writing about revenge, sword fights, and queer characters. Currently

she's focusing on her first children's novel, which explores ghosts, aliens, and grief (though she often spends more time perfecting her writing playlists than actually writing).

Ghosts of Summer is a children's novel inspired by *Stand by Me*, but with a supernatural twist! The book follows twelve-year-old alien-hunter, Nora, as she tries to locate a crashed UFO in order to fulfil her dead brother's dream. However, things aren't so simple when she stumbles upon a fellow alien-hunter, Olive, who claims to be a ghost. The following extract takes place shortly after Nora and Olive's first meeting.

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Ghosts of Summer

CHAPTER FOUR

The thought of Olive still unsettled her – the way she stared into the distance like she could see something Nora couldn't, and her icy skin. Trust the one other alien hunter she'd ever met to be crazy.

Nora passed her mum the ingredients for the pasta sauce before letting out a heavy sigh. 'Can I ask something?'

'Go ahead.'

'What does a dead body feel like?'

Her shoulders stiffened. Her mum stepped away from the scratched wooden counter and looked to Nora. 'Why do you ask?'

'I just thought you'd know, and I was just wondering, I guess.'

'Is this about Oscar?'

It was like her mum had a superpower. All it took was one look into your eyes and she knew everything. Nora hadn't got away with a lie in years. She dropped her gaze to her hands and tried to squeeze the right amount of confusion into her voice.

'What do you mean?'

Her mum placed a hand on Nora's shoulder, squeezing. 'I know you wanted to see him, honey, but I had to make a decision and I didn't think it was best for you to see him like that.'

‘No, it’s not –’ she began, but her chest tightened as memories of the hospital rose in her mind. Of being left in the waiting room, of pressing her hand to a cool coffin. ‘It was just something I was watching on TV.’

‘Nora, I’m really starting to consider putting some parental controls on that thing.’

‘It was just daytime TV! But they were saying the skin stuck to your hands like goop –’ she lied, trying to pull her mum in with facts.

Her mum tutted. ‘No. Nothing like that, especially if they’re recently dead.’ She let out a breath before saying, ‘A deceased person feels cold, heavy. Their skin feels different to you or me.’ She took a breath. ‘The best way I can think to describe it is you know when you fall asleep on your arm and it goes dead?’ Nora nodded. ‘It’s a bit like that. Your arm is heavier, flopping about. They’re usually a bit stiff, too, from the cold, but they’re still them. Not some zombie or whatever you’ve seen.’

‘Oh,’ Nora said, heart tensing. *How Olive had felt*, she thought, *minus the stiffness*, before she chided herself. *Ghosts aren’t real. She’s not dead.*

Her mum let out a sigh, rubbing Nora’s upper arm now. ‘Are you sure this isn’t about Oscar? It’s normal, you know, to wonder about these things, especially since the anniversary is in a few days.’

Nora didn’t know why they called it an anniversary, like it was something to celebrate. If it was up to her, they’d forget the day all together.

‘No. I swear. I was just curious.’

‘Okay,’ her mum said, backing away. She didn’t take her eyes off Nora for some time as she cleared her throat and returned to the sauce.

Neither of them spoke for a while, the air around them thick with discomfort. After a long pause, her mum crouched

before the cupboard and muttered, 'Ah shoot. We're out of pasta.' She stood up again, knees cracking. 'You'll have to have beans on toast or something.'

Nora pulled a face. 'We could go to the shop?'

'Nope. I don't have enough time before work.'

'I could nip to the Post Office?'

Her mum considered it for a second before reaching into a drawer and handing some change to Nora. 'Be quick.'

Nora took the money and dashed outside, grabbing her bike. It was a short trip to the Post Office. It rarely opened; when it did, the hours were completely up to the owner, Old Joe. If he didn't want to work, he didn't open the post office. If he wanted to sleep, he slept instead.

Nora respected that. She'd tried that excuse when it came to school, but her mum didn't buy it.

The Post Office was a small sandstone building that was once a house. It still was partly Old Joe's house. Inside was cramped with a few shelves of necessities: bread, milk, toothpaste, pasta. The rest of the shop was for packages.

As she entered, the bell chimed above her head and Joe looked up from the register, and said, 'Heya, pet.' Even after decades in the south, he still retained the hints of his Scottish roots.

Nora said hello and moved to the shelves, searching for pasta, freezing only steps away.

There's no way, she thought as she stared at the wall where a flyer was pinned onto a corkboard. On it, a familiar face smiled at her. But the girl in the picture was warmer, welcoming. It was a school photo of a pretty girl in a dark blue school jumper. Her hair was neatly plaited and her smile was perfected for that very moment, making her eyes shine. Nothing like the wild eyes and ashen face Nora knew. Still, it was undoubtedly her.

And in big, bold letters, it declared her MISSING.

Below the photo, it added, *If you have any information on the whereabouts of Olive Jones, please contact the police.*

The change slipped out of her hand, clattering at her feet. The sound was unnaturally loud, breaking her from her trance, jumping her to life. She grabbed her money and moved back to the pasta, assessing with all her concentration if she should grab penne or fusilli to distract her mind from the poster.

'You alright, pet?' Joe asked.

Nora looked over her shoulder, nodding quickly, but her mouth was dry and a sickness was building in her stomach, rising and rising and –

'You know her?' Old Joe asked with a wry smile.

Did she? She'd met her, hadn't she? Even if the girl claimed she was dead. If anything, the poster proved she was alive. Missing, but alive.

But then Nora's eyes trailed to the last seen date, the night of the crash.

It's not possible, she thought. How had nobody else seen her lingering around the treeline? Unless... She shook the thought. Olive wasn't dead. She couldn't be.

'I'm okay,' she said, realising Joe was still watching her. She decided on penne and took it to the till.

Joe rang it up and Nora handed over the money before heading to the door. As her hand touched metal, Joe called, 'I hope someone finds her soon.'

Finds her. People still thought she was alive. Which she was. She was definitely alive, Nora told herself. She'd seen her. Touched her and her cold, dead skin...

No. Not dead.

But how, standing between trees, facing the main road, had nobody else seen her?

Outside, Nora stuffed the pasta into her bike's basket and peddled towards the forest.

*

Nora jumped off her bike, not bothering to hide it in the bushes like before. She didn't even know if Olive would be there, but Nora had a sickening feeling that she was the last person to have seen Olive.

Nora glanced at her phone. She was already pushing it; the journey to and from the Post Office didn't take that long, and her mum would be wondering where she was.

She had to know what was going on.

'Olive?' Nora shouted, pushing further into the trees.

The trees began to grow thicker, the trail rockier from where it was less travelled, and though she'd barely been walking more than a few minutes, her t-shirt began to stick to her back. She hated summer.

Turn back, she thought. She didn't have the time to go further, and what if Olive had been lying? What if she was long gone by now?

But Nora couldn't stop her feet from moving, venturing deeper and deeper into the forest. It was like something was controlling her body, desperate to know if Olive was just a strange, missing girl, or if she was telling the truth and ghosts were real.

Ghosts aren't real, ghosts aren't real, she chanted silently to herself, but then she caught sight of a wisp of black hair and froze.

To the right of the trail, a girl rested on a fallen tree, head bent, staring at her feet. Olive.

Nora studied the girl for a moment, taking in her perfectly still form – the way her shoulders didn't move as she

breathed (was she *even* breathing?) – and the odd, grey tint to her skin. It was a little breezier than the past few days, but the wind didn't touch the girl. And Nora would bet, if she touched Olive's hand again, it would be icy to the touch despite the sun blazing down.

This can't be happening, her mind screamed. *Ghosts aren't real*. But there Olive was, sat before her: alone and missing to the rest of the world.

'Oh my god,' Nora muttered to herself. 'I'm losing my mind.'

Olive's head shot up. As she met Nora's gaze, she smiled weakly, but it quickly vanished again. 'You came back.'

Nora stuffed her hands in her shorts' pockets. 'Is it true? Are you dead? Like actually *dead*.'

'I told you,' she said softly. 'Why would I lie about this? I don't even know you.'

Nora sucked in a breath, mind still fighting for a logical explanation to it all. 'I – I thought it was a prank or something. I don't know. Maybe someone set you up to it, but you're -'

But you're dead. Nora couldn't bring herself to say it out loud. If she said it out loud it became real. Too real.

'Ghosts can't be real,' she whispered, taking a step back.

'So you believe in aliens, but not ghosts?'

'I -' Her voice scratched against her throat. How could she explain it to a stranger without sounding crazy? Nora swallowed and continued, 'It's not just aliens. The ocean is mostly unexplored – how can we rule out weird sea creatures? Maybe the megalodon is still thriving, deep, deep under the sea, or maybe, somewhere, sirens are lurking the seas. And Bigfoot – though, he's probably just some weird, misunderstood guy – could exist, or once have. Maybe dragons did, too, but got wiped out by heroes – or *villains*.' She shrugged. 'But ghosts? People die every day. If ghosts

were real, surely, they'd be everywhere. There'd be proof. So why you?'

Olive shook her head and gazed up at the sun, staring directly into it without wincing. 'I don't know, but if you don't believe me, why are you here?'

'Too many things don't make sense.' Nora let out a breath. 'And then I saw a flyer in the post office. A missing poster.'

Olive snapped back to Nora. 'A poster?' she whispered, eyes widening. 'Oh my God, my parents must be – they must be so worried. I didn't leave a note or anything, I just saw the post and left without even thinking. All I could think of was being the one to find a UFO.' She stepped back, bowing her head and shaking it over and over. 'Now I might never see them again.'

Nora took a step forward and reached out for Olive's shoulder to comfort her. As soon as skin touched skin, Nora almost jerked back. She forced herself to remain still, adjusting to the chill running from her fingertips and up her arm, sending a shiver down her back.

'But you could see them again though, right? I mean you're here. I know you can't leave the forest, but with the posters, it's only a matter of time before someone spots you –'

'No. You're the only one who's seen me,' Olive whispered in a voice so quiet the breeze almost drowned it out.

Nora shook her head. 'Why me? I don't know you.'

'Honestly, I don't know how this ghost thing works, but I've tried to get people's attention – I've run in front of hikers, waving my hands, shouting. Nothing. I tugged on this guy's shirt, thinking he'd have to notice me, but he just shrugged me off and kept going. That's why I got so excited when I saw you yesterday...because you *saw* me.' She took a step back and Nora's hand fell. 'I don't know if my parents would be able to see me if they came.'

Nora ran a hand through her hair, pushing damp strands from her sweaty brow. There had to be another explanation, but none of it made sense.

This is real. Ghosts are real.

And then, as quickly as the excitement came, it died again as another thought crossed her mind: *if ghosts are real, how come Oscar never came to see me?*

‘But then why me? Why can I see you?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know. I just wanted to find the aliens. I didn’t want this to happen. I didn’t -’ As she spoke, her body shuddered and she choked on tears that weren’t there. ‘What are my parents going to think?’

Nora didn’t know what else to do, so she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around Olive’s back, pulling her close. ‘I’m sorry.’

After a moment, Olive’s hands, limp at first, found Nora’s back before bunching in Nora’s shirt. The cold seeped through.

Nora closed her eyes, remembering her mum’s face those first few days after losing Oscar: bloodshot eyes and dry skin, a heaviness that seemed to last forever. Nora felt it too. There were days when she didn’t think she’d ever stop crying.

Nora couldn’t imagine how Olive’s parents felt, not even knowing where their daughter was.

‘Do you want me to call them for you? Or the police?’

Olive pulled back with a breathless laugh. ‘Like they’d believe you. *You* still hardly believe me.’ She let out a sigh. ‘I - I don’t know what to do. I don’t - I don’t even remember where I was when it happened. It’s still blurry.’ She dipped her head, shaking her head. ‘All I know is I was looking for aliens and something stopped me. And now I’m trapped here.’

Heat prickled against Nora’s back. She hoped there wasn’t some crazy, murdering guy in the woods. That would

certainly make it harder to find the aliens. 'So what are we going to do?'

'We?'

'I can't leave you,' Nora said. Silently, she added, *Plus, I still need to find that UFO.*

Olive smiled gently. 'I don't know. Maybe...we retrace my steps. I have a theory on where the UFO might have crashed, but I lost all my notes when I...' She let out a sigh. 'But if we retrace those steps...we'll find, well, *me*. And hopefully the aliens, too.'

Nora couldn't believe it. 'You still want to find them?'

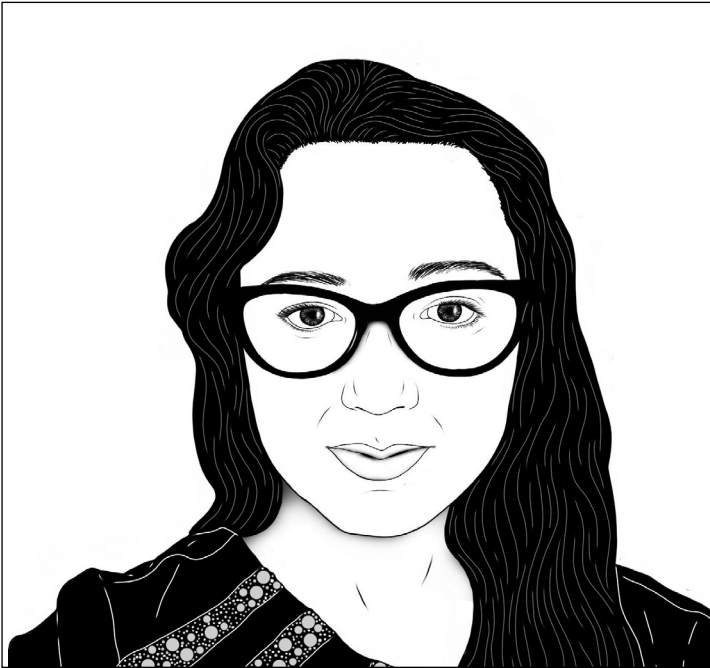
'I can't leave here. I have nothing else to do, do I? Besides, if I died trying to find them, I have to. I can't have died looking for aliens and not even find them!' She paused, looking to Nora. 'You don't need to help, though.'

Nora bit the inside of the cheek. She knew the right thing to do was to call the police or someone, let them know the missing girl was actually a dead girl. Plus, Olive had died. Something or someone had *killed* her. The forest wasn't safe.

But there was a UFO out there, and Nora wasn't about to give up.

So she held out her pinky finger and waited for Olive to link hers. Once they were connected, warm skin against cool skin, Nora whispered, 'We'll find it. I promise.'

Georgia Way



Georgia Way was born in Dorset. Before her Creative Writing Master's, she worked in PR until giving in to her obsession with language.

This portfolio represents Georgia's interest in turning old forms and ideas to new purposes, in versions of foreign language poetry recast into new historical and psychological contexts, and in a mythological sonnet with a contemporary twist.

In addition to poetry she writes libretti, including a chamber

Georgia Way

opera for Manchester Contemporary Youth Opera, and a song cycle commissioned by City Music Foundation. She holds an MA in English from Trinity College, Cambridge.

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Ars Poetica: Fishing

The fish have exhausted me.
All day I've been in the sun,
catching nothing. See how
the mesh of this net
is too wide: whole shoals
swimming freestyle
escape me.

With such poor equipment
how will I ever reel in

the slippery djinn I am after?
This is their lake: the carp
are cast into shade
by their brilliance, the dace
forced into the sedge,
while night after night
I lose sleep
wishing for fresh water.

I dreamt last night
of a great fish with gold scales
harrying me through
weeds closing like curtains.
Time to cast the net again...
When I land my prize,
I'll steam it in garlic,
ginger, and chilli:
it will burn my tongue,
and I'll learn the real catch.

The Road to Aleppo

—After 'Cé' by Louis Aragon, 1943

On the road to Aleppo I heard
how a country's song can change.

Long ago I heard the tune
telling of an emir's wound,

of a rose dropped in the path
and a robe unfastened,

the palace of the mad sultan
and the lilies in his fountain,

of the forever fiancée
and her garden to dance in:

and I, I swallowed these stories
like iced sherbet, these sham glories.

The river bears my thoughts away
as dusty prayer,

with the guns not yet fired
and the tears not yet dried:

My abandoned Syria's
broken voice.

The Road to Córdoba

—After 'Canción de Jinete'

by Federico García Lorca, 1937

Distant Córdoba
bends the earth with its weight.

Moonlight makes these roads
strange to my horse's hooves,
turning the track into a nation
of fallen mosquitos.
Shrouded in summer heat,
Andalucía is laid out
by the roadside.

The night wind sighs,
but I do not want its mourning.
Let it pick up its black skirts
and howl for the little horse,

and I will keep on to Córdoba,
knowing who watches me
like a lover, from the walls
time has made pillowy.

Apollo After a Bad Night

The sun-god, up before dawn, now regrets
the night's whisky. Filling the kettle,
he kicks himself for going to bed so late,
annoyed at letting his routine disintegrate.
He eats a pastry, plus a capsule of flax seed
to stave off the sugar guilt, then stands
in front of the mirror, finding a pimple to squeeze.
He meditates, using his wellness app
to regain focus: sun salutations and mantras
such as *I can fix the day again when it breaks*,
although mindfulness cannot fix thousands
of years' unemployment. He's a failure,
(no-one believes in him anyway): he has nothing
to do but watch re-runs of *A Place in the Sun*.

C. A. Hannan



More or less, C.A. Hannan is a writer. The 'more' is that he writes every day, usually from the hours of six to eight when he's back from his day job, though sometimes he takes Sundays off. The 'less' is that he doesn't really have the professional part down to a tee. He's had two short stories published by *Ellipsis*, but he doesn't have an agent or a book deal with a publisher, wink wink, nudge nudge.

This is the first chapter of *Heart of My Enemy*. I shall refrain from giving too much away about the rest of the piece because this chapter will pose questions that shall be answered throughout the rest of the manuscript. However, I am a person who cannot resist a tagline: How did you survive the Millennium Bug?

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Heart of My Enemy

Dad told me that if I ever saw a man in uniform I should run back to our basement.

The soldier was only five feet ahead of me, silhouetted under the light of a single street lamp. His smoking gun pointed at the stars.

I turned. My foot caught the lip of the pavement and I almost twisted my ankle, but I couldn't let him get me after curfew. I had to run. I bolted across the road.

The smash of another gunshot knocked the wind out of my lungs.

I stopped running.

'Come here,' he shouted as loud as a horn.

My feet wouldn't move.

The loaf of bread in my hands seemed more trouble than it was worth, but Dad would still be hungry. I was still hungry. I unwrapped my scarf, bundled the loaf inside it and shoved it under my coat. My neck and face were cold, but at least the soldier couldn't accuse me of theft.

I turned, feeling the pain in my ankle.

The soldier was ten feet away from me. His massive outline was a black block underneath the yellow light.

'Do not make me wait much longer,' he said.

I limped faster.

Ten feet became nine, nine feet became eight; my legs felt

like lead weights. I wrapped my arms around myself to keep the loaf from falling out of the bottom of my coat. With my head down, I scanned around me from the corner of my eye.

The alleys between the buildings were thin. The darkness meant that I could only see varying shades of black from where the tributary roads went deeper into Stonehaven. Alleyways. Alcoves. Smashed windows that I could have jumped through – all seemed miles away.

‘No escape,’ the soldier said, waving his gun at me. The smoke was still pouring out of the barrel.

There was no cover on Longport Road, I was an obvious target.

I stepped over a frozen imprint of a tyre tread. Longport Road used to be a canal that split Stonehaven in half, but once the War-Hawks started their occupation they drained it and filled it in, turning it into a long dirt track for their heavy transports.

I had to stretch across a pothole before stepping back onto the pavement. Foot by foot, inch by inch, the soldier came closer. With each step, heat rushed up my face.

I heard the faint thump of the officer holstering his gun.

Stonehaven was a war zone, yet there were no crows chirping. No distant sounds of screeching tyres. No distant firefights. My footsteps were all I could hear. There was a tightness in my chest, a bellyache, a dizziness that made the black of night even more impenetrable.

Before I knew it, I was stepping beyond the arch of light from the street lamp and into the soldier’s shadow.

He wasn’t dressed like one of the normal City-Guards, with their blue and white helmets. He had a long black waxy coat, with a ruff of wolf-grey fur. A large Hawk badge was sewn to his chest, instead of a breast pocket. The duck-beak of his city-camo cap cast a shadow across half of his face,

covering his eyes. I had seen this type of man before in propaganda.

The officer was fiddling around inside his coat.

Fight or flight. Wasn't that what set the strong apart from the weak? I couldn't run. I couldn't fight. So what was I?

My bladder filled. I wanted to hold my crotch, but then the bread would have fallen out by my feet. The cold hurt my chest.

'What's your name?' He said. His accent wasn't like mine or anyone else's in Stonehaven. It was posh and loud as if he had rehearsed it for a play.

Smoky clouds escaped the officer's mouth.

'...' Words were stuck in my throat like hard boiled sweets. My heart was hammering my rib cage.

Underneath the light, the officer's waxy-coat rippled with scuffs, scrapes and mud-stains.

All the words, all the sentences I might have created brought tears to my eyes.

And if the bread falls out? The officer will know I am a thief.

Sweat dripped down my wrists into my mittens. My fingers were curled up inside them because they were Dad's and I had to keep them from falling off. I clutched at the bread, it was slipping away from me. The loaf was still warm so I tried to take comfort from it, but the officer's presence made that difficult.

The officer leaned forward.

I saw his green eyes and I found something unexpected. They had a reassuring quality, a quality I had never seen in my enemy. They looked at me as if to say, you're ok, I have no claws. But War-Hawks hunted people down, they tore cities apart. Dad told me that they had a direct line to the devil himself. Dad said that only rebels could deal with War-Hawks.

What if this officer thinks I'm a rebel?

The officer scratched his thick blonde beard. He smiled, deep lines stretched out from his dark eyes. Why was he smiling? And then a bear-paw of a hand reached out towards me.

The officer was going to smash me to pulp and bones.

A man in uniform, run; that's what Dad said.

I stepped back.

'Don't you fucking think about running.' He grabbed my sleeve. It was caked in white crusty snot that had frozen in the cold. 'Have you ever heard of a handkerchief?' he said. 'Rebels wear rags like this you know. They're filthy, like you.'

I wanted to squirm. I wanted to scream. Instead I dropped my chin to my chest, and closed my eyes.

I could feel each throb of my heart in my ears.

'Well, what's your name?' he said.

Muscles bulged through his waxy coat; stretching the material to the brink of tearing.

For a second I thought about giving him my name, but talking brought a pain to my belly as if I had been stabbed with an icy knife.

My hands were shaking. If I spoke, and accidentally insulted the officer, then I would be taken to Slaughterhill. From what I heard, those who had broken curfew did not do well in Slaughterhill.

The officer took off his cap to reveal a bald head.

He has no hair like me?

The officer's scalp was shiny. Barely any stubble, except for the sides of his head, just above the ears, where there was a speckling of fine blonde hair. I bet he hadn't lost all of his because of lice though.

'What's your name? Don't make me repeat myself again.'

Should I give him a false name? Alexander? No, too posh. Maybe something like Howlock, or Solomon.

What was I thinking? What name wouldn't he see through? I couldn't think of any other than my own.

'Elijah,' I said.

When soldiers called me rat or shit I was still Elijah.

'Do you mind if I call you Lije? Elijah's a bit of a mouthful,' he said. 'I'll call you Lije for short.'

I didn't mind what he called me as long as he'd let me go.

The officer held out his hand and revealed to me a photograph of a young boy. The edges of the photo were dog-eared. A cross, from where it had been folded, split the portrait in four. It looked like one of those old school photos with the blue backgrounds.

The boy's cheeks were swollen like a cherub's and his neck was long. He'd clearly had his face washed in the last couple of months.

'Well Lije. I need help, you see. Have you seen this man?' the officer said.

A man? Impossible. I had never seen a man with such a young-looking face.

'Pierce. That's his name. He has a missing finger on his right hand. And he's got these deep brown eyes you see and he's very pale. You'd recognise him.' He pushed the portrait closer to my face. 'He's missing the middle finger you see.'

Trawling through my memory, I tried to remember if I had seen this strange, youthful man in the last couple of months.

'Come on, come on, you must have seen him.' A deep crease had appeared in the space between his eyes. The hammering in my chest disappeared, leaving behind only pain, but if I could answer this then it could be my chance to escape. If I said I had seen Pierce and told him where, then he'd let me go. I could run far away because he wouldn't need me anymore. I could run back to our basement. Back to Dad. But I couldn't recognise this Pierce. It was easy because most

of the people in Stonehaven looked the same. Their faces were dirty and their clothes a jumble of rags. Their hair was always ruffled or had been shaved off to keep the lice away. I'd have noticed someone as clean as Pierce.

I shook my head. I waited for him to speak. Officers and soldiers who had been disappointed by the civilians of Stonehaven always had a speech prepared.

The officer returned the photo to the inside of his coat. He moved his giant hand towards me, but I clutched the loaf to my chest, digging my fingers into the scarf.

'What's that you got?' he said, looking at the bulge under my coat.

'Stop,' I said, the word coming out of me as a last defence. 'It's bread. Just bread. Please – please – just bread-'

'You're a thief?' He said, looking me up and down with crinkled lips as if he had just sucked a lemon. 'You also a rebel?'

'No,' I said, stuttering as the word hung like an anvil off my tongue.

'Good,' he said. 'A thief I can stand. A rebel I cannot. Do you know Stonehaven well?'

My stomach twisted, becoming even tighter. I knew the quarter better than anyone, but I didn't want to tell the officer that.

He leant towards me. I saw thick lips underneath thin strands of his blonde moustache.

'I bet you'd do anything to stop this fighting wouldn't you?' he said, his voice softening. 'How old are you?'

'Fourteen.'

He looked surprised, his eyes moved up and down my body.

'If you're a civilian and not a rebel, you'd do anything to stop this fight, eh?'

Wouldn't anyone want to bring this war to an end?

‘Have you got a family?’ he said.

It was just me and Dad, but I reckoned I could call that a family.

I didn’t understand how anyone could survive in Stonehaven without a family, but people did. They were resilient, more than I could ever be. Dad always spoke about the importance of resilience.

‘Speak, speak,’ the officer said.

‘Yes, yes,’ I said. ‘Dad – It’s just me and Dad.’

‘Well Lije. Pierce is, how best can I put it? A man of importance to the War-Hawks. A diplomat of sorts, if we’re using the old definitions. I’ve been tasked with finding him. If I succeed? Well... Let’s just say... Stonehaven would be a better place, but I need help getting around the city. I’m not from here you see.’

What exactly did he mean by, ‘Stonehaven would be a better place’? This man was a War-Hawk. Did he mean a better place for them? It was us or them, so I couldn’t imagine he meant it would be a better place for the civilians.

My throat started to dry.

My stomach felt like it was gripped in a giant’s fist. Refusing to help the officer felt like a one way trip to Slaughterhill.

But this man was an officer in black. Officers weren’t to be trusted. Maybe this was a trick. I reckoned it was a trick.

Be brave. Be brave.

I could hear the chirpings of nocturnal creatures going about their nightly routines. I could see all the places I could escape to.

But the street light caught the Hawk badge stitched to the breast pocket of his coat. Its talons were gripping a mouse.

I didn’t know what to do.

Giving him what he wanted seemed the least dangerous option.

'I'll help,' I said.

'You see, I want this fight to be over,' the officer said. 'You can help me achieve that.' A smile stretched across his face revealing a set of black stained teeth. 'A man called Eric Jones can help us. I'm looking for him.'

Was he expecting me to know this person as well?

'He was last seen at six Agnes. Can you take me?'

I turned and pointed north.

The officer pulled a half-smoked pack of Marlboro Golds from his breast pocket. Cigarettes were a currency more than an indulgence, but he seemed to pop one in his mouth without a care for what they might be worth to someone like me. He lit the cigarette and started to suck. I hadn't seen them smoked in a long time. Orange embers glowed at the tip of the fag and smoke trickled out of his mouth towards the indigo sky.

'Do you want one?' The officer said.

The cigarette hanging from the officer's lower lip was undoubtedly cool. How he held it in between his fingers, I couldn't help but imagine guys clicking their fingers to attract all the girls.

But the smell was horrible and it was filling my nostrils and stinging the back of my throat.

'Sorry, maybe - maybe - later.'

'Stop stuttering,' he said. The officer placed the half-smoked pack of Marlboros back into his breast pocket.

'Go on. After you then,' he said.

I obeyed.

With an officer of the War-Hawks behind me, I walked deeper into Stonehaven with Dad's words ringing in the back of my head:

A man in uniform, run.

Kathryn Tann



Kathryn Tann is a young writer from South Wales. She came to Manchester after a year's break following her time at Durham University, where she gained a First Class BA in English Literature. Kathryn writes short fiction and creative non-fiction, and is currently working on her first novel. She has a number of online publications, including *Porridge Magazine*, *Wales Arts Review* and *The Manchester Review*. Her work was also shortlisted for

the PENfro Prize in 2019 (followed by publication in the anthology *Heartland*) and for the Terry Hetherington Award 2020 (anthology forthcoming). She also works as a freelancer in the publishing industry, produces *The Podcast for New Writing*, and has experience reviewing both theatre and literature.

As a writer, she considers her greatest sources of inspiration to be wild and coastal landscapes, and the wonderful idiosyncrasies of the human individual experience.

This is an extract taken from Kathryn's novel-in-progress. The book has a five-part, non-linear structure, formed of five pivotal journeys in the lives of a mother, Nancy, and her daughter Jane. The story shows how experiences move across generations, and the rapid evolution of travel and transport across the 20th century. *Part One* takes place on a steamship bound from Liverpool to Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1922. Nancy is nineteen and from Swansea, and has been married just a few days to Herman – whose hometown they're now heading for. We meet her when, on the second day, Nancy is overcome with seasickness.

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Until We Arrive

PART ONE, CHAPTER III

‘Oh Nance, are ya sick?’

Nancy was crouched on the floor between the two narrow beds, her back to the cabin door. Before her was the Canada Steam Company room-standard chamber pot. Remnants of her small breakfast swam below her watery eyes, and all she wanted was to be alone. Herman’s voice reached her from somewhere far away, hardly noticeable under the thud of her heart against her breastbone.

‘Nance?’ the voice repeated, ‘Are you alright? Do you need anything?’

Nancy pictured her new husband standing a few feet behind her, a look of horror slapped across his face. *Not now*, she thought. She needed to stay very still and quiet. She needed to concentrate.

‘I’m—’ her voice came out all wavering and pathetic, ‘I’m fine. I’ll be fine.’ She tried to focus on her breathing, pushing out one shaky breath after another. For the first time since they met, she wanted Herman to go away.

‘It’s going to get worse, they said.’

Nancy closed her eyes, took a deep, noisy breath in through her nose, held it in her tired lungs, and then released through pursed lips. Her brow, fixed in its frown, ached with the effort of it all.

A hand rested gently on her shoulder. She felt its warmth through her clothes. She thought of her wrists resting on the rim of the bowl, the state of her unclean hands, felt them shaking. Eyes tight shut, she began to sob.

‘You’re okay sweetheart. Don’t worry about it, you’ll be alright.’ The words reached her more clearly now. With relief, she understood that they were kind words, free from disgust. The pressure squeezing on her brain released a little and, eyes still shut, she leant back from the chamber pot.

‘I just,’ she gulped in another sob, ‘I’m sorry. I couldn’t help it.’

‘Hey, course you can’t,’ he said, rubbing her shoulder.

There was a pause. Nancy sniffed.

‘And remember,’ he went on, ‘I was at sea for a living – I’ve seen grown men in far worse states than this.’

Herman laughed. It rang horribly in her ears, short and rigid as though it had been forced through an angle. They sat in silence for a moment.

‘Don’t be embarrassed,’ he said quietly, ‘it’s only me.’

The cabin floor began to swing once more, and Nancy lurched over the pot in panic.

‘You go to dinner without me,’ she blurted out. ‘I’ll be fine, I just need some time.’ The sentence was rushed and slurred, and with it came another sob.

So many times Nancy had dreamt up scenarios where her new husband could save the day, wrap her up in sympathy and make her feel safe and treasured. It was one of those privileges of marriage she had most looked forward to – to be so important to someone that each little ailment is their greatest concern. She’d already feigned a few headaches in an attempt to test this out, each to varying degrees of success. And now here she was, in a real crisis, with Herman being so kind and understanding – and all she wanted was to be left alone. What a waste, she thought.

*

When Herman returned from dinner, Nancy was lying on her bed, still dressed, with the rinsed-out pot by her side and the flannel, cold and damp, laid across her forehead. Her mouth was dry and acidic and her throat still knotted up, but she was feeling a little calmer.

The hopelessness of it all was that there was nowhere to go on this huge ship that wasn't also moving. She was desperate for something solid. She had closed her eyes countless times already to imagine herself walking along the path leading up through the woods behind their house, towards the hill that had the view of the sea. It was a path she had taken less and less as she grew older, being more interested in the centre of town than its wilder edges. But she could still follow it in her mind like a line across her own palm. It was well-worn and winding, veined with polished tree-root ridges. The light was dappled with sycamore leaves, and she could smell the last of the morning dew hanging in the cool air.

In her mind, she had stamped her feet on the hardened ground and listened to that hollow, oaky, forest-floor sound. She had pressed her boots down on every familiar root and rock, and heard the coos and mutters of the woodpigeons. But every time the room tilted and her stomach lurched she was back in the small, windowless cabin. She couldn't see her way through the next few days, she could only think back. To trees and solid ground.

Herman sat on his bed and began unlacing his shoes. Nancy shifted slightly, resting more upright on her pillows, afraid to upset the balance and send her head spinning with nausea once more. She was waiting for him to ask her how she was.

'They've said no one is to go on deck,' said Herman finally.

'Just saw one of the boys in the corridor. Hopefully this is as bad as it gets.'

'Oh... What else did he say?' Nancy's voice was scratched and tired.

'Nothing,' said Herman, 'Nothing for you to worry about.'

Herman continued pulling off his shoes, and Nancy edged herself a little further up her pillows. This was Herman taking care of her, not wanting her to fret about details and possibilities. But Nancy wanted to know that it wouldn't be like this the whole way there. It couldn't be, surely.

'Do they know how long the storm will go on?'

'Don't know. Didn't say.'

Nancy took the flannel from her forehead. 'Oh, I do feel awful,' she said, determined to receive some sympathy. She wanted to hear that honeyed version of his voice again.

Her stomach dropped with another swell and fall. She imagined the waves outside, great walls of them, rising up and sucking in swathes of inky sea. She was aware of the ball of nausea getting hot and swollen inside of her again.

Suddenly, she couldn't stand the silence.

'Is it true that sailors sleep in hammocks? I can't see how that would help in a storm like this. Surely you'd be swinging about all over the place.'

Herman was very still. His gaze was fixed on a seam in the carpet between their beds. 'Mmm,' he murmured.

'How was dinner?'

'Quite nice.'

'Did you sit with anyone?' Nancy tensed against another rise and fall.

Herman cleared his throat. 'Yes. Bumped into that old widow we met.'

'Oh, Florence. That's good. I imagine with all her travelling she's alright — like you. Did you talk about much?'

‘No, not really.’

‘Did you find out where in Nova Scotia she was from? Does she know Halifax?’

‘No.’ Herman looked at Nancy, his face hardened. ‘Not well, anyway.’

Herman stood, then stumbled without warning towards her bed. The cabin had tilted steeply one way – so steeply that Nancy was up against the panelled wall and certain that the whole ship would turn; belly-up in the middle of the ocean. The electric light in the room dimmed for a moment, and then everything began to right itself again.

Nancy sat up straight. There was a groan. At first she believed it to be the sound of metal creaking under the stress of the storm – but it was Herman. He was on his knees at the foot of her bed. Her first thought was that he might be praying; his arms were stretched out in front of him, but his fists were clenched tight around the cotton covers.

‘Darling?’ said Nancy, quietly. ‘Are you alright?’

For a few moments he was unresponsive, but then his shoulders heaved under a deep sigh. He rose slowly, and his pale eyes, heavy-lidded and distant, met hers. ‘I’m fine.’ The room had steadied. Herman lifted himself carefully to his feet, as if nothing had happened. Then, seeming suddenly uneasy under her watchful concern, he turned away from her.

‘Go to bed, Nance. If you sit there waiting for each wave you’re bound to feel sick. It’s in your mind.’ He started to unknot his tie. ‘Go to bed.’

*

Nancy was wrenched out of sleep by an unfamiliar cry. She had never heard a man wail. There was something about it

which struck every nerve in her body, and made them all strum 'danger' at once.

Mixed in with that jolt of panic was a feeling of despair. She must have finally fallen asleep, after hours of lying sweaty and half-undressed, trying to recall in her homesick mind the dopey sounds of woodpigeons. She had carefully cradled the lump in her throat, occasionally letting it rise only to gag nothing into the pot beside her. She couldn't have been asleep long – the hair around her temples was still damp from the sliding tears. It was enough, however, for her eyes to lose accustom to the dark. The room was blackness.

'Herman?' she said. Her voice seemed to be eclipsed by the audible thudding of her heart. 'Herman, what was that?'

It had been too loud and close to be a dream. It had been right there in the cabin. Through the walls, Nancy could hear a baby crying somewhere else. She doubted herself. But then, a sob; released into the room despite every effort to hold it back. It creaked out of a throat aching to suppress the tide.

Nancy lowered her feet to the carpet and widened her eyes, trying to make out Herman. Wider they opened, almost beyond her control, looking for familiar shapes in the gloom. Another sob escaped through clenched teeth, shaken out with 'Oh, God.'

'Herman, what is it?' Crouching forward, hands out first, Nancy managed to find the edge of his bed, and then a hand. She held it, and it held hers back.

Her bewildered mind raced through murder, blood, injury – despite the sealed door of the cabin, locked tight before the lights went out. Something had changed, however. There was a hopelessness in the room. 'What is it?' she repeated.

'He's gone. He's gone, Nance.' The grip on her hand tightened, fingers pressing hard between the splay of her bones. 'The idiots killed him and I was goddamn sleeping.'

Nancy took a deep breath. This wasn't real, it was a nightmare. It was her husband's nightmare. They were safe in the dark of their little cabin, still floating on the top of the empty sea.

She eased her hand away from his. 'Shhh,' she said. 'It's alright.' She began feeling her way down between the beds and around the edge of the wardrobe. She could hear the shaking breaths begin to control themselves, air hissing out between clenched teeth. Finally, she found the switch. She paused, for a moment wishing they could keep the darkness after all.

When the yellow light blinked everything into existence, husband and wife were squinting directly at each other. Herman's eyes were swollen, spilling over with tears and shame. His sheets were in a ball against the wall, and he was clutching his knees. Across was Nancy's bed, still made but creased and rippled where she had lain. The fold-out dresser between the beds was empty. Her hairbrush and pins had slid and scattered across the carpet, and powder had been flung in dusty spokes out from its upturned pot. Small movements still tugged on Nancy's balance, but they were frequent and rhythmic now, easier to predict and almost manageable in this way. The baby in the other cabin was still crying its tiny heart out.

Nancy went to her husband. She balanced next to him and slid an arm behind his shoulders, then felt his body twist around, his face press into her neck. His chin was heavy on the bone of her shoulder, and cold tears and sweat gathered along her collarbone. Under the sudden weight, it took all her effort not to topple backwards from the edge of the bed.

'Shhh, sh, sh,' she hushed, just as her Mam would do for her, just as she did for Jonny when he would have his bad dreams. 'Shhh, sh, sh.' Nancy didn't know what else to do. She could feel his lungs heaving under his ribs.

‘Was it a nightmare?’ She whispered.

Herman turned his face down, freeing his hot breath from the folds of her blouse, ‘Yes,’ he muttered.

The cabin pitched and Nancy threw a foot down to stop them both from tumbling to the floor. It swung again and she tried to push them further onto the bed, pulling her hand away from his slippery grip.

‘It’s alright, my lovely.’ Usually, she would have been afraid of patronising him, of making him feel small – but this wasn’t her usual Herman. ‘Do you want to tell me about it?’

‘No, I can’t, it’s—’ Herman pulled himself away. He exhaled the heavy contents of his chest and dragged a hand down from his hairline to his chin. When he spoke next, his voice was almost ordinary again. ‘It was just a nightmare.’

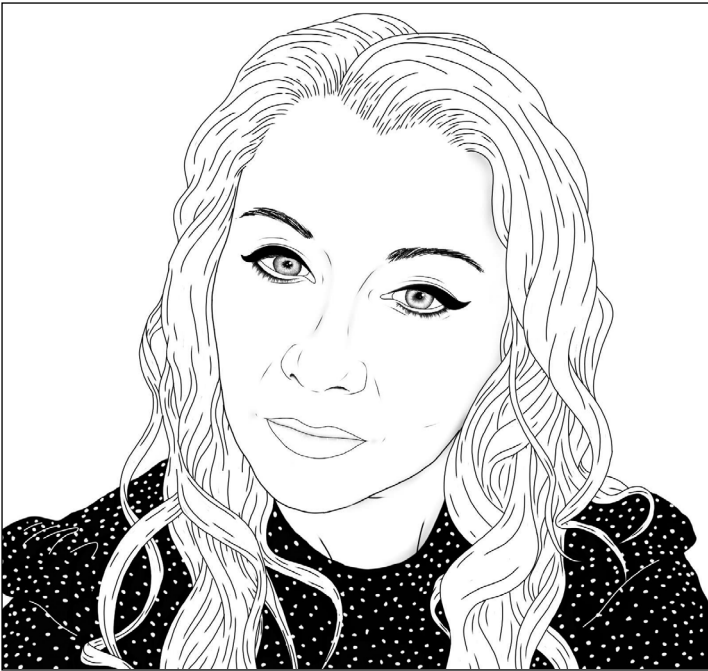
Nancy thought about the strings of his snot and saliva she knew were left sticking to her damp curls.

‘Come on now,’ she took his hand again. ‘It’s only me.’

Husband looked at wife. The bloodshot stare told her to beware – that there was something here beyond her simple understanding.

‘It’s fine.’ Herman looked down at Nancy’s crumpled skirt and sagging stockings. He frowned. ‘Go back to bed.’

Danielle Elliott



Danielle Elliott is particularly interested in working-class voices, writing against the bourgeois novel and its constipated obsession with interiority. Intending to write narratives with outward-angled perspectives, she is currently redrafting her first novel, which is set in a near-future dystopia that is a nod to George Orwell's magnum opus *1984* and William Gibson's ground-breaking cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer*. The dominating genre of her

work is speculative fiction that focuses on exploring dialogues within a dynamic environment, continually asking the questions 'what if?' and 'why?'

The contribution in this anthology, 'A Rose from Dust', is an extract from a larger work, but adapted for the short story format. The original piece spans centuries, with a complex plot that reconceptualizes ruling powers as a cabal of inhuman monsters. It has required detailed historical research and biblical re-interpretations but is queued as a subsequent project. The extract focuses on poverty in Georgian Manchester, but with a gothic twist; it emphasizes that Manchester's prominence and success in the industrial era was built on deprivation and was, as the future Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli described in 1844 – 'as great a human exploit; as Athens.'

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A Rose from Dust

‘Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. My last confession was in 1803, whenas I was a novitiate at The Convent of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin, and I was as thee – made in God’s image. Alas, my flesh has been corrupted and I am more akin to the Lilith of Babylonian demonology than thy Adam or Eve. Ergo I seek not thy shriven, sith I am beyond thy jurisdiction.’

‘I am an ordained priest, permitted to minister...’

‘Whisht. I beseech thee listen. T’is thy opinion, not thy absolution, I seek... Forsooth, I am an abomination, albeit my Husband, Luke, would never believe. Innumerable hours did he spend studying my body samples through a lens but died without answers. Natheless, he made excuses for my sins and reasoned if I had existed as an unconscious savage then I was not responsible. He would say, “Do we blame the snake for the prey it kills? No, because t’is in its nature and it knows no better.” T’was a kindness, he was a good man, but I was unable to confess all. The wintry morn I first met Luke, I was expiring under the blaze of the rising sun. He thought not of the pustule eruptions on my skin; thus, I was gathered into a carriage, conveyed to his lodgings and nursed to health – as I said, Luke was a good man. Being preserved from death, infamy and sin, I remained and married him. For Luke was a surgeon, and his medical procurements were civilising, but my salvation did not begin with him.

‘Alas, t’was Rose that roused my senses to a state of passion methought impossible, and for whom I was crying that morn. My gentle Rose. Rose, with her eyes hollowed large, her chilblained hands and her too-big boots dangling and curling at the toes. Without Rose I would have remained a pulse of hunger and a creature emptied of meaning. Verily, the country-dwellers from whence I came conjectured I was the evil Baobhan Sith of folklore and there was certes truth to their terrors. Forsooth, I am a night creature sustained by blood, and albeit mine visage is a maiden mask, I have walked the earth for fourscore and ten years... Ah... I hear thy thoughts of contempt, thou thinks I should get thee to the mad-doctors.’

‘T’is not my place to judge, merely to mediate.’

‘Aye, t’is not thy place. For I know of thy carnal lust for the Widow Braddon, thy dalliances in the supper rooms with forsaken ladies whenas thou was first ordained, and thy doubts at the quiet hours whenas thy master creator, God, seems hidden by Charles Darwin’s natural selection...’

‘What trickery be...’

‘Hark, t’is no trickery and thou need not defend; t’is not my place to judge. I say not to accuse but merely to convince. The modern world’s disbelief has been serviceable but does not presently suit my purposes. In 1832, I came hither to Manchester, finding the citizens – governed by empiricism, rationale and reason – ignored superstitions. Thus, I walked the gaslit streets in the guise of an anonymous passer-by, dollymop, or beggar. Forthwith I was startled to consciousness by the environment. The noise, the noise and smell were so loud – black fumes choking in the throat, the effluvia from ashpit privies, the tread of weary feet, the crunching of cogs, the thrashing of looms, rumbling carts, shrieking steam boilers – but t’was amidst this clamorous stench that awareness

evolved. The wilderness whitherward I had come, with its green scents and still nights, became a comparison. Gradatim cognizance returned: first a word, then chiming phrases, and lastly the rattling tangle of sentences. I listened to voices trampling over one another, intrigued by the busy weft and weave of unfolding narratives. Textures appeared, natheless, I was detached.

‘T’was Rose; she made the difference.

‘One summer eventide in 1832 was whenas I noticed her in Piccadilly. Shrouded in threadbare but modest clothes, she was begging with murmured half-pleas and a downturned head. Rose spent till evenfall securing the cost of a cheap meal, and her manner contrasted with t’other urchins, who forthright solicited. Likewise, I had borne hunger, and acted as a brute, but not Rose. Rose was dignified. Observing her, I was reminded of erstwhile habits by which I had once lived, of long ago whenas I was with the grace of God – whenas I was mortal flesh and blood.

‘Rose purchased, then ate, a cup of eel-jelly at a food stall. Whenas she departed, I pursued. Apart from the crowd, Rose walked and cried. She held onto the crucifix around her neck and lifted her eyes to the heavens, but nought was there for her. The sky was obscured with noxious fumes and not even a star shone through – not even a star to inspire her imagination and that she might attribute to lost kin, saint or angel. Yet Rose twinkled, she twinkled with a loss that threatened to spill into tears.

‘Whenas Rose reached the railway viaduct, she holed herself within one of its arches and attempted at snatches of sleep. I watched over her the entire night, listened as she muttered for her parents in disturbed sleeps and offered whispered prayers to a God it must have seemed had abandoned her. At twitterlight Rose awakened; she

uncrumpled the folds of a restless night from her clothes, attempted to wash the dirt of poverty from her skin, and tried combing away her destitution with neat fingers.

‘I was enthralled.

‘In the dark hours I was her shadow, becoming familiar with the places she frequented, people she knew, and the rotting frames cracking twattle at her back. Whenas she secured work as a Piecer in the mills, she was able to afford a residence in one of the many lodging houses situated in the curve of the Medlock. This area made up part of the city’s inner residential belt, but its living conditions were dire. I knew the place; bringing a quiet death amongst its inhabitants was overlooked and dismissed as a consequence of the poisonous microclimate or cholera epidemic. Whenas desperate with hunger I had prowled its corners, the experience had been repulsive – like dining in a pig sty. The stink of human waste permeated the entire area, wherewith was unsurprising considering one communal cesspit was allocated to every twain hundred people and during periods of heavy rain these would overflow.

‘The ghetto Rose inhabited was the same one that haunted Engels’ conscience and propelled his pen. He accused the place of being populated with those whom had reached ‘the lowest stage of humanity’. T’was appropriate that I should walk its ruinous streets, but not Rose. She did not seem to belong. Rose carried a sense of worth about her being and was not an incident of shame, as were many of the urchins. Natheless, the place had always been her home, but for the most she had resided in the better parts – in the purpose-built working-class suburbs south of the river Medlock. Those accommodations had been comfortable: the streets were paved, through terraces came complete with their own necessities, household middens were emptied weekly, and

the dwellings were occupied by families – not packed to the rafters with drifting lodgers. Howbeit, Rose was no longer the sole cherished child from a respectable working-class family. She was an orphan, but one unhardened by her misfortunes.

‘Alas, Rose stood apart and was noticed. Notwithstanding her dull attire passers-by remarked on the delicacy of her features. I eftsoons appreciated Rose was an understated beauty and acknowledged the comments with misplaced pride. I should have heeded the warnings. For the bad memories dull, but never leave. That is the rub of a life without death, there is no forgiving forgetfulness.

‘I remember t’was an autumnal Saturday in 1832, the weekend’s pinnacle, whenas finding victims was effortless. I had been in the town less than an hour afore happening upon a comatose drunk. He was bloody, robbed bootless, and strewn in a knotted back alley forby the Bull’s Head Tavern. Eager to seek Rose, I drained him swith without a thought to whether he had a family who depended on him or would mourn his loss. Notwithstanding my attachment to Rose, inflicting death remained uncomplicated. I resented my victims sith I perceived an unfettered passage to paradise extending to them in the afterlife, whilst I was condemned. Aye, by then I had recollected my erstwhile life and comprehended my abject position in the Christian cosmology – but never did I resent Rose. I wanted to save Rose from Fortune’s insanity; t’was this causative, events unravelled as they did.

‘Once fed, I continued to the Saturday night market cluttered along Oldham Street and Shudehill. I knew if Rose was unable to find work, her habit was to stay at the market until it closed at midnight. She would wait for hours, hoping one of the stallholders might take pity on her. Haply for Rose

they were able to distinguish her from the professional beggars and she was oft given the unsold foodstuffs that would have spoiled by the next market day. That eventide Rose was at the market, monochromed amidst the choleric red faces, jaundiced drunks, and floral whores.

‘Due to the gin-laden blood, my senses were eschewed and I had not forthwith realised who was alongside Rose. Ma Wilson could have been mistaken for a flamboyant lady. She was apparelled appropriately, but I was not fooled by her accessories, gloves and bonnet. Dressed and coated, inviting as a sweetshop window, Ma Wilson’s heavily rouged face betrayed her, but Rose was innocent to the peril. She lavished Ma Wilson with courteous bows and deferential nods as though the strumpet warranted it. Ma Wilson deserved nought but a dance with air.

‘I panicked and shoved through the crowd, ignoring the jostling complaints, pressing against unwashed bodies to reach a distance where I could eavesdrop. Ma Wilson was splattering sweetmeats into Rose’s palm, delivering blandishments, and commenting that Rose’s mother must be proud of her. Rose’s eyes shimmered and she confided her mother was gone. T’was music to Ma Wilson’s ears, natheless she bemoaned the shame for Rose, that she was alone in the world. Tears were fat and ripe in Rose’s eyes. Aware of the conversation’s effect, Ma Wilson inflated her cajolery; told, she had sons but wished for a pretty lass and if she were her daughter she would be gradely proud. She clucked Rose under the chin and pretended to wipe a tear from her dry eyes. Forby her twain sons listened, they feigned interest in the wares of a haberdashery stall but occasionally their greedy eyes roamed over Rose.

‘Rose uttered, gramercy Ma’am, and curtseyed afore politely nibbling on the sweetmeats. Ma Wilson insisted she

was not a lady of airs and graces, that the twain were friends, and she should be addressed accordingly. There was further gratitude and deference from Rose, whilst Ma Wilson's slit mouth twisted into a rotten-toothed smile. Thereon no invites were extended to Ma Wilson's abode, as I feared, but her parting words made me shiver; the threat they would see much more of o'one t'other thereafter.

'Ma Wilson withdrew in a flutter of fond faked goodbyes, imparting to Rose she was a compassionate respectable. Nought could have been further from the truth. Ma Wilson was a despicable creature, loathed even amongst her ilke, and never walked the streets alone. Evermore was she flanked at either side by the imposing figures of her brutish sons. They were equally despised but were a pair of cosh wielding bullies who were feared. I knew Ma Wilson's intentions. There was no kindness in her black heart. She befriended urchins because she was a madam specialising in the trade of juvenile prostitutes and was detested because her brothel was niche – procuring children into prostitution to supply a handful of well-paying clients with virgins.

'I approached Rose. Afore that day we had never spoken and though she was familiar with my face, she knew nought of me. I worried Rose would not heed my warnings, was aware my unkempt appearance might discredit my words. Natheless, I blundered – without introductions – into conversation. I presaged Rose that Ma Wilson must be avoided and was a wicked woman of ill-repute, who would think nought of corrupting her. Rose was flummoxed. I well-nigh regretted my words, well-nigh, as they gilded Rose with sadness. I wanted the world to be a better place than t'was, to tell her she could have faith and trust people, but such was an unchancy lie. Over the ensuing weeks, the mere suggestion of Ma Wilson was sufficient to propel Rose in the opposite

direction. Methought this would be adequate, but I was mistaken.

‘Rose had a price on her head and a client awaiting.

‘They would not let her be.

‘In the day, I was unable to watch over Rose, and the complications of protecting her against the likes of Ma Wilson became apparent. Ma Wilson, her sons and the client were not the sole problem; if they were, I would have killed them all. Howbeit, there were more Ma Wilsons, other clients and whole enclaves of criminals. Aye, I admit t’was feasible for Rose to escape being kidnapped and set to work in a brothel, but degradation did not have to be a dramatic affair: it could happen incrementally. Trawling the streets, I had witnessed the effects of desperation; I did not want this fate for Rose, for it to ruin all that captivated me.

‘I resolved, none of them – not the Ma Wilsons, the perverts wanting to warp misery into their own brand of pleasure, the tailor suited merchants’ disdain that daily made her feel shame, the police with their vagrancy laws who would heedlessly criminalise then imprison her – none of them would have a chance to destroy Rose. They could not have her.

‘Mayhap the decision I made was selfish, wrong, but I made it.

‘The opportunity came one cold wintry night whenas twain ragged girls accosted Rose in the street. Gaunt faces hung on the severe grim line of their mouths, they glared through narrowed eyes and resented Rose for attracting their sweethearts’ admirations. Whenas Rose cowed from the confrontation, they were spurred to tug, claw and spit at her. I rushed in, boxed both girls’ heads – bloodying one’s nose and blackening t’other’s eye. Wounded, they ran into the night. Rose was trembling but appreciative of my intervention.

She admitted she was afeared of the pair and that they had pursued her for days. Inbetwixt the conversation I heard Rose's stomach curmur.

'I interrupted and remarked, parfay, thou are famished. Rose blushed but nay denied. Forby was the tinkling bell of the muffin-man and I heard his jingling ditty, one-a-penny, two-a-penny, hot cross buns. With monies stolen from an erstwhile victim I purchased a buttered muffin and insisted she partook of the victual. She was awkward but grateful and accepted the food with smiling acknowledgement. As she ate, I followed her to the railway viaduct. Unnerved by the attack, feeling vulnerable and attempting to express her gratitude Rose offered to share her sleeping place. I accepted. We settled into one of the bridge's alcoves and Rose prepared for sleep by tightly binding her threadbare clothes against the chill. I unwrapped my shawl and tucked it around her. Initially there were objections but these embered to a murmur as exhaustion, warmth, and a full belly slipped her eyes to sleep.

'The city centre slumbered, but underneath that bridge – at night – seethed a populace crawling with coughs, drunken bickerings, and the earthy grunts of sex. Beneath these sounds I listened closely to Rose's breathing – waiting for the heavy rhythmic sound of deep sleep, which came swith. Careful not to waken her, I enfolded Rose in my arms and softly rubbed at her to keep in the warmth. Close up I felt Rose's frailty: the staggered vibrations of her heartbeat, the oft-times rattled breath sticking in her throat, and the bones that painfully protruded wherethrough her skin.

'Rose was dying. No Physician's diagnosis was needed. The crimson blood splatters of her cough told Rose she was ailing with the malady that had stricken her mother. I had known from our first encounter she was consumptive. I could smell the disease and its odour intensifying daily. She had

another year if she was lucky, twain if her standard of living improved, but this was doubtful. Already the mill owners were refusing her work and the more respectable lodging houses denied board due to her hacking cough. There was no reprieve for Rose. The meagre time she had left would bring nought but suffering, desolation and loneliness.

‘Whenas the chill of deep night passed and silence arrived, I knew the period for stalling and avoiding the deed I had come to commit had ended. I pulled Rose closer and drew back the shawl to expose the white flesh of her neck. With my lips I felt for the pulse of her jugular, and then unfurled the proboscis from my tongue and pierced into her vein. Bitter with disease her blood gushed into my mouth, but despite the fatality of the wound Rose felt nought. My anaesthetic saliva numbed the pain and these circumstances were preferable.

‘There was no suffering.

‘Rose did not rouse from her sleep.

‘I nursed and drained her life. The shallow stuttering of her breathing and stammering of her heartbeat reminded me I was losing her. I faltered, as gaping loneliness came upon me. I wanted to keep Rose but knew corruption with my curse was even worse than Ma Wilson’s plot. I would not damn Rose.

‘The moment she passed I knew. The moment the spark that was Rose was no more I felt the warmth of welcoming arms. I may have sith doubted the veracity of this experience but then I felt I had acted as an angel of mercy: I had allowed her an unperturbed passage to paradise, and t’was painless.

‘Yet, Rose was gone...

‘Her absence was upon me and I felt grief. The world had been emptied of Rose, and I was responsible. On that day, I nigh scorched in the sunlight because my thoughts were filled

with the distraction of Rose. Close to dawn, I stumbled from the railway arches and did something methought only humans could.

‘I cried.

‘That morn Luke discovered me by happenstance; I was distraught and blistering. We were wed for twoscore and one years but never did I reveal the circumstances of our first meeting. Forsooth, he ascertained my hand was responsible for Rose’s death, but my reasons remained concealed, sith I could not betray his forgiveness. I was conscious whenas I killed her, and he would not have understood. Imbued with radical ideas and his swevens inspired by the Romantics, the likes of Shelley and Blake, Luke would have insisted there would have been another way. For t’was Luke’s flaw and his virtue that he knew nothing of the degradation life could bring. Natheless, for the likes of Rose if I had allowed, life is not merely suffering – t’is losing thyself and descending deeper into the abyss...

‘In the wake of my husband’s death I query withholding these truths, ergo whereof saith thou to thy confessional?’

Mary Trend



After graduating with a first from Oxford, Mary transferred from literary theory to literary practice. She won the Toasted Fiction radio play competition and had her collaborative piece on pregnancy and paranoia recorded in front of a live studio audience. She was also highly commended in the InkTears Flash Fiction competition for her piece, *Haunting*. Her writing

explores the female experience, and she is working on a novel meditating on female greed.

‘Divine’ is a short story which climaxes with Bethel pushing her sister off the edge of the bell tower where they are sunbathing. It will remain inconclusive to us, and to Bethel, whether this was intentional or accidental. Throughout this piece, ideas of duplication and doubling, individuality and archetypes are key. This short story is one of a collection in which our roaming narrative voice sits in on events throughout the city of Manchester as a curious observer.

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Divine

It's a beautiful afternoon; let's rest a while. We can perch on the edge of this bell tower and watch the wash of the city beneath us.

Down to our right is a vast statue of Ghandi, forever striding forwards. The hot July sun bounces off the curve of his head, gleaming bronze. A small girl with tight dark curls springs at his ankles, trying to hold his scalding hand. Her white linen dress blooms around her as she lifts and sinks. Here swoops her mother, taking her hand and gently guiding her down the street. Chairs spill out onto the pavement, with people drinking and eating. Their faces are flushed and excited, with browning cheeks and freckled shoulders. A waiter, with one arm crooked holding a tray, reaches out to ruffle the girl's head as she passes – she squeals and rushes round to the other side of her mother, burying her face in her skirts.

Across the road, colourful shop faces trade people between their open doors. The blind windows of high-rise offices loom behind them, carving up the glowing pavement with jagged shadows. Construction whirrs endlessly on, coiling up on the warm air in a muffled moan. Below us, neat quadrangles of green are cropped around the Cathedral. A cat, crouched in the shade of a low-lying grave, licks the back of her paw and rubs industriously at her ears.

Behind us, the sun pours into the captive square of the bell tower. It bakes the stones, so the air warps above them like mottled glass. A breathless flag tangles round the flagpole, while a ladybird crawls tiltingly into the twisted knot of its rope. There is a heavy wooden door at the far side of the tower. It is studded with thick bolts, hot peppercorns of brass.

If you listen carefully, you can hear feet slapping up the stone steps.

The door swings open and a young girl joins us in the blinding light at the top of the tower. She is very pale, with long blonde hair swinging to her waist. She wears a bright orange sundress that clings to her damp legs and her hair is pulled back from her face with a twist of turquoise fabric. Her cheeks are red and flushed and she flings down her rucksack and begins rummaging inside. She is twenty or so, flushed with youth and heat.

Something flits in the dark mouth of the doorway. Another girl: the ghost of the first. She has the same skin, the same blanket of hair, the same pinched nose. It's hard to see her because the light out here is so bright, but their resemblance is uncanny.

'We're going to burn.' The ghost speaks!

'Don't be boring,' calls the girl in the sunlight. She squashes a plastic water bottle in her hands as she takes deep gulps. 'It'll turn into tan anyway.'

She perches the lid on top of the bottle and holds it out towards the doorway.

A pink arm extends from the shadows. The fine hairs on this arm are flattened darkly against her skin, glinting with sweat. Just as she is in reach of the bottle, her sister (they must be sisters) yanks it out of her grasp. She purses her lips and makes that kissing noise people use to attract cats. Psssp-pssp-pssp.

As the second girl steps into the light, we see that she is the duplicate of her sister. There must have been a time when they curled together, side by side, in the womb. A moment, early in their life, when a doctor leaned forward over the sonogram to count the glowing domes of their heads. A spasm of concern from their mother as she wonders how they're going to manage. A long time ago now.

She grabs the bottle from her sister and squats in the flimsy shade by the balustrade while she drinks. This girl is wearing a worn pair of denim shorts and a navy blue t-shirt with a collar. The word Bethel is printed on the back in faded white letters. We'll call her Bethel.

'Fine. I'm here. Are you happy now?' she asks.

Her sister ignores her, instead plucking contemplatively at the straps on her dress. In a decisive movement, she pulls the fabric over her head and spreads it on the hot stone floor. She slips off her shoes and springs lightly onto the cloth. She is naked except some small lace underwear. Buttercup yellow.

Bethel starts. She looks in quick succession at her sister, at the floor, at her sister.

'What if someone sees?' she says.

'How?' her sister snorts. She gestures towards the edge of the tower. The only thing visible to them is the winking moon of the Travel Inn. The girl dips back into her rucksack, tugging at something. She looks up at Bethel, 'You're not embarrassed are you?'

Bethel's cheeks are already red, so it's hard to tell if they redden at this comment.

Pulling out a towel, the girl spreads it on the stones next to her dress. She wriggles out of her knickers, revealing a neatly trimmed rectangle of dark hair, and begins shaking a bottle of sun cream.

'Aren't you going to join me?' she asks.

'What, so I can burn all over?' Bethel snaps.

The girl snorts again as she caresses her shoulders with cream.

'It isn't funny Deb, if Dad finds out he'll be really mad,' she says.

'Don't tell him then.'

'He could lose his job,' Bethel adds.

'Good riddance,' the girl called Deb says as she lies down, closing her eyes.

Bethel dips into her bag for a towel and spreads it out. Her movements are exaggerated and slow, as though she feels her sister is watching her. She perches on her towel, the white-hot light glaring on her, pink and discontented.

A smile curves around Deb's lips and she begins to whistle a lilting tune. Bethel looks up to glare at her sister.

'Don't,' she says.

Deb laughs and closes her eyes, pointing her face towards the sun.

*

It's quiet up here. Just the faint grumble of traffic and the clangs from building sites. Perhaps we should move on. There will be lots happening across the city today.

Then - whistling again. The lines around Deb's mouth are quirked in a smile.

'I mean it, don't.'

Deb whistles louder. The same nursery-rhyme tune.

In a flash of movement, Bethel pulls her t-shirt over her head and throws it towards her sister. The flesh under her arms pools over her nude bra.

Deb laughs and waves the t-shirt like a flag. A hot blush creeps down Bethel's neck.

‘Shut up. Pass me the lotion.’ She says.

Deb pats the stones next to her and skates the bottle towards her sister. It gives up limply half way. Bethel, huffing, crawls along her towel to fetch it. As her sister’s body jerks into view, Deb frowns.

‘All of it,’ she says.

Bethel doesn’t respond. Instead she is spurting lotion into her palm. She begins rubbing aggressively at her stomach.

‘What is your problem?’ she asks.

Staring at her sister, Bethel pops the button on her shorts and tugs them over her hips. She is wearing a greying pair of briefs with a twirling hole by the elastic. Deb eyes her up and down, snorts, and turns back to the sun.

‘On second thoughts, maybe you should put them back on.’

Water rushes across Bethel’s eyes, pooling in her lashes. She swallows thickly and lies down.

To look at them, it’s hard to see their differences. They both have the same long, pale legs, turning gently red at the kneecaps. They have soft, rising stomachs and the same thick collarbones. Four blue eyes, with four rows of pale lashes. Four ears. Four hands. Four feet. One knee has a small crescent shaped scar across it; this is Deb’s knee. One of the twenty fingernails is chipped, revealing the dark pink skin underneath; this is Bethel’s finger. They are like fully-grown cherubs: blonde haired, with soft circular faces and full, fleshy cheeks.

Deb is lying flat, unnaturally so, pressing both her arms against her towel with her legs ever-so-slightly crooked to allow the tops of her feet to catch the sun. Her face is passive, expressionless, like she’s asleep.

But her sister’s is tense with emotion: lips pursed, eyes scrunched, a deep line cutting down her forehead. The sun

lotion is forgotten at her side and her chest is spotted with pink. One arm covers her stomach while the other teases loose threads in the towel. Two bees dance above her face, tickling her hairline. She bats them away and they rise out of her reach, contemplating her. She waves her arm above her head in awkward, jerking movements and they eddy off towards the side of the tower and down to a neat village of hives on the main roof below.

With a warm, resonant thrum, the clock in the tower strikes two. The sound loops across the two sisters, spreading on the air, before it slips over the balustrade and pours over the city.

A horn blares up from the street below. It is met by another in a garish harmony. The sounds are flat and urgent, each trying to overpower the other. Deb squints an eye open. She raises her head – is that shouting? It's quite hard to hear but it sounds like an argument. She gets up and leans over the edge of the tower, her long hair swinging across the curve of her neck.

If we lean over the edge with Deb, we can see two white limousines with high-shine metal trimming, face-to-face, blaring at each other. Each has long white ribbons tucked into their bonnets, stretching up to their front windows. Inside each car, two men with grey caps are pressing on their horns. One holds the note, flat and heavy, while the other favours sharp, repeated bursts. Outside the cars, a woman dwarfed by an enormous hat is gesturing furiously at a man in a grey suit. He is calmly holding up a piece of paper, tapping at it with his free hand. One chauffeur winds down the window and starts gesturing to the other to turn around. You take your eyes off the world for one minute – but it never stops moving.

There are bewildered faces scattered across the pavement, clumped into alliances. They are dressed in an assortment of

colourful, uncomfortable clothes. Pink-cheeked and discontented, they hold up invitations or beaded purses to keep the sun off their faces. Two women, wearing identical lavender dresses and flowers in their hair, are trying to knock on the Cathedral door. But the brass handle must be blisteringly hot; one of the women ducks down and gathers up her lavender skirts to hold the handle. She is trying to knock it against the door, but her skirts are muffling the sound. Here comes a suited man, striding up behind her. He slams his fist against the door and immediately recoils, cradling his fleshy hand. Looking the women up and down, he reaches into his breast pocket and produces a handkerchief. The lavender woman takes it from him, without thanks, and proceeds to smash the handle against the heavy wooden doors.

Bethel has kept perfectly still through all the smashing, blaring and shouting. Her eyes are closed, her lips held in a tense line.

‘Beth, come look,’ Deb calls over her shoulder.

The woman by the limousine turns smartly away from the man and throws open the back door of her car. She holds out an authoritative hand and a slim, pale arm wavers out from the darkness to take it. A glowing leg follows. On the end of this leg is a perfect white stiletto; it skitters as it meets the pavement. White tulle begins to foam at the open door, spraying upwards towards the roof of the car. The arm tenses and with almighty effort, a body begins to rise from the belly of the car.

The woman starts frantically pulling the tulle over her daughter’s bare legs. The protruding arm grasps the roof of the car and slowly, slowly levers herself out. The man in the grey suit is watching this performance, mesmerised, seemingly forgetting his own daughter in his car.

A bride appears before us. Like a crumpled duster, she shakes herself out. She has dishevelled brown hair looping down her back and the bust of her dress has slipped to the side. Her mother darts forwards, grabbing her delicately beaded décolletage and jerking it firmly into place. The bride bats her away, embarrassed, and attends to her own preening and plumping.

The grey suit, not to be outdone, turns sharply towards his limousine and, flinging open the door, ejects a slim, stringy woman dressed in a flowing Grecian style. The white of her dress sings against her caramel skin.

The two brides face each other in the street, ghostly pillars of women. In the hot summer light, their dresses glow around them like saintly aureolae. They exchange a few quiet words as their families shout around them.

Up on the roof, we find Deb chewing at her hair, fixated on the commotion below. Her eyes gleam with a certain excitement, as she extends a leg backwards and begins poking her sister.

‘Dad’s double booked. They’re going to kill him this time.’

Joss Areté Kelvin



Joss Areté Kelvin is an avant-pop art bender* whose work incorporates writing, music, video, dance, and emerging technology. Their non-fiction writing has been published in *Pop Culture and the Civic Imagination* (2020) and online at *The*

* magic realist multimedia artist

Manchester Review. They directed and produced *Your Friends Close*, a festival-premiering feature film currently streaming on Amazon; released music and video art, headlined LA venues, and played festivals as Areté; devised and performed immersive nightlife experiences; and served as event producer for the Transforming Hollywood conference (USC/UCLA) and other future-focused symposiums while working for pioneering media scholar Henry Jenkins. Born and raised in NYC, they graduated magna cum laude from Northwestern University in Chicago and lived in Los Angeles before expatting to the UK. As a creator, they are obsessed with innovation in storytelling, form fitting function, and surrealist explorations of the subconscious. They answer to any pronoun and are likely to rebel against any box.

This is an extract from *KEYS*, a postmodern surrealist fantasy novel in progress.

Cassandra is broken into bits in body and mind. Diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder, she awaits trial in an institution for a murder she can't remember committing. But when she tumbles into a dreamworld labyrinth – part shock and prescription drugs, part her mind's determination to heal – Cassandra unlocks the doors of perception. On an axis of two planes – our world and the surreal world she discovers – she must battle her demons, put her selves back together, and find wholeness. The piece is being simultaneously developed as an interactive experience utilising music and emerging technology.

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KEYS

You can't
Breathe. Speak. Think.
Moving too fast. Not getting anywhere.
Lightning hits. Jolts. Spasm. Puppet body.
You hear them say: Grand mal seizure. Any known history?
You hear them say: The patient has not spoken since the
police found her, sir. You hear those voices.
And
Beyond the spinning room. Beyond the tornado (you're
becoming), you hear the other voices, quiet, in the tornado's
eye—

*They're earthquaking.
The walls are caving in.*

Then there will be no walls.

Without walls, the whole body will collapse.

*Why are you so sure the walls are holding them up?
What if the walls are keeping them in?*

*But what you're calling for is chaos.
What will happen to them when it all comes flooding back?*

What will happen to them if it doesn't?

Click click click
Wheels jiggling over the squares.
Machines beeping. Hungry children.

You're cruel. You sit there alone in your – cave –

*We are all alone here.
You have made sure of that.*

*I have done what is necessary to keep the whole functional.
You will destroy everything.*

*We hold the door open for change.
Change is always hard.*

*But you don't know.
You don't know what change will bring.*

Yes. We don't know.

*So you're willing to risk them.
You're willing to risk all of us.*

You can't play if you aren't willing to risk anything.

We're not anything. We're everything.

A sound like a scream, a siren
Chopped into pieces.
The cry of a hurt animal.

So you would keep them all trapped here – for what?

KEYS

What does that win?

It keeps them safe.

It keeps you safe.

Yes. And you.

The price is too high.

You go too far. The body will not hold.

We feel the boundaries shifting.

Can't you feel how weak they are?

We can sense a chance:

*The whole system – all of us – will
break down.*

*We might be able to
break through.*

Dr. Lois Linklater, MD
Silverland Hospital – Psychiatric Ward
Rancho Mirage, California

May 31, 2016
Case # 0294LB

APPEARANCE AND BEHAVIOR
AT TIME OF ADMISSION:

White female 24 years. Complexion pale. Hair auburn. Height 5 ft 5 in. Thin – mesomorph. Dressed in large white men’s tee, black underwear, black bra (no underwire). Hair to thoracic, knotted. Long necklace: gold chain, clasp broken, chain knotted to hold together, with simple gold keys labeled ‘Smith and Wesson.’ No other jewelry.

Behavior – Lashed out; screaming; crying; needed to be held down and restrained. Head whipping back and forth. Experienced grand mal seizure soon after arrival.

BASIC CASE HISTORY:

Patient Cassandra Hardt was admitted ten days ago in late hours of morning after being contained by police post-psychotic episode. Police discovered Hardt on top level of Arclight Hollywood parking lot, curled up in fetal position next to boyfriend Het Martin’s body; gun was in Martin’s hand but covered with Hardt’s fingerprints. Police retrieved letter sent by Martin to friend Nick Davidson a few days earlier. Letter implies dissociative identity disorder, schizophrenia, addiction. Patient will be kept in Silverland Hospital until trial.

**HET MARTIN'S LETTER TO NICK DAVIDSON
POSTMARKED JUNE 3, 2016 ; RECEIVED JUNE 5, 2016**

Nick,

Everything is off. It's raining in LA today — car crashes abound — the world feels like it's ending. I've sat myself at this typewriter and I'm not getting up again until I've told you everything. Yeah I know it's the 21st century. But. I can't stand the idea of you scrolling through this on your phone. Plus I suppose what I'm living through would be easier if I could imagine it as a film so it makes sense to write it where I write my screenplays. Anyway, this whole disaster would a good film make. I bequeath the idea to you if I don't ~~make it~~ end up getting to it myself.

It's a nightmare I'm living now but it started off like a dream. The Cassandra that existed before all this began was the most beautiful human I've ever had the privilege to know. I may be a video-game-loving, bone-business-card-waving modern guy but I'm still a damn romantic, they can't beat it out of me and I can't blame her, even after everything, because — it can't be her. She's been possessed, Nick, by some sort of demon, that has us both in its clutches and won't let us go.

OK. I'm going to go back to the beginning and tell it all. There has to be a record of us, of Cass & Het. Whatever happens.

INT. LUCY'S PENTHOUSE, MIDNIGHT.

I saw Cass before I spoke to her. It was midnight on January 6th of this year, that sort of cold Los Angeles gets in the winter, when the desert wind gives you a pleasant shock. She

was sitting on the edge of Lucy's white leather couch, staring out the double glass doors that led to the balcony. The lights of Los Angeles reflected in her eyes. Cass made LA feel like Blade Runner written by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Like Bret Easton Ellis doing Raymond Chandler. Like — my kind of place. She tilted her chin up and threw back a shot of whiskey, and I watched her throat, too-long, like the throat of some sort of bird. She wasn't easy-beautiful in that Los Angeles way. She was strange-sexy, like Amanda Plummer. (You know, from Pulp Fiction and The Fisher King?) From the second I saw her swallow that whiskey I knew — I had to have her.

You know me, Nick. I don't fall head over heels, because I move so fast who can even compete? But that was the turn on with Cass. She was intimidatingly smart but as vulnerable as a little girl. There was something about her that made you want to protect her. There still is ~~even with how she treats me now when~~

Nick — she could keep up with me. The whiskey. The meta film ideas. The taste for adventure. The sex — the sex. Hot wax, head as I drove cross the border into Los Angeles on our way back from Vegas, snorting cocaine off my cock — her idea. I finally found the Blair to my Clay.

And it wasn't because she was beautiful, though she was. She never believed it. Which is insane. I remember on Valentine's Day, after we got back from the shooting range, we'd done a couple of lines maybe, and I stood her in front of a mirror & forced her to stare at her own face. I told her — You're more beautiful than Marilyn Monroe. Cass was a Monroe junkie. But who could blame her. When she showed me The Misfits and we watched Marilyn call after those running horses, I

said to her — You didn't tell me they made a movie about you. They're the same — that vulnerability bubbling to the skin, the tactileness of how open they are to you, the offering up, the emotion so close to the surface it sparks off their soft skin. ~~The neuroses, the tragic end~~ The child in a woman's body.

When I told her she was more beautiful than Monroe she pushed it away and when I wouldn't let her turn away from her reflection in the mirror — she cried. Cass is the sort of girl who cries when she's happy. What the fuck am I supposed to do with that, Nick? It kills me. She kills me, Nick — being in love with Cass is like watching a car accident in slow motion. And I'm in the car. And all the doors are locked. And God help me, I don't want to get out. I don't want to get out. It's the best fucking ride I've ever been on.

**EXCERPTS FROM RECORDED TREATMENT SESSIONS
BETWEEN THE ACCUSED, CASSANDRA A. HARDT &
DR. LOIS LINKLATER, MD.**

DR.L.: Do you know why you're here?

CASS.: Do you know why you're here?

To help you. Who am I speaking with right now?

Cleo would spit in your face.

Who is Cleo?

Who is Cleo?

I can't help you if you don't speak with me.

I would very much like to help.

Cleo is a knife. She likes cutting.

Go on.

Het knows her. Ask him.

Cassandra – are you Cassandra?

Cass.

Cass – Het is dead.

So am I.

No, you're not. You're right here with me.

You're wrong. You don't believe me.

I would like to believe you.

It's Het's revenge.

Revenge for what?

... Listening.

Listening to what?

... Everything.

Elenia Graf



Elenia Graf is a Manchester-based poet whose work grapples with the resurfacing of the traumatised self, navigating lesbian identity, and always wanting more (but never saying it). She was born and raised in southern Germany and now spends most of her days trying to be a person, or a writer, or a formless cloud of black smoke. Elenia recently released her first zine titled

Elenia Graf

‘inside me sleeps fury’ and is currently working on a collection about dykehood and gendered experience.

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 **@dirtrat**

your brown leather boots

(that i know you own
because i saw them in a picture)
have been on my mind for days

scuffed leather stuffed with denim
yellow laces double tied
a half inch block heel

i imagine them now
on the grimy floor of a northern rail train
skin inside skin

i haven't met you yet
but i want to trace the marked leather
with my fingertips

each imprint scratch dent
a testament to the streets they've crossed
defiantly

girls like us walk with calculated steps
(i want to watch you walk
towards me)

each heavy lift of the leg
each time the worn-off tread
hits the ground

means do not mistake me for anything
other than what you think i am
(but you already know that)

i imagine you
in your brown leather boots
looking out the carriage window

are you even wearing them
today?
are they tapping

(i hope they are)
like my black leather boots
on the platform?

something quiet

i swallow my SSRI breakfast
text you good morning
hesitate to open the blinds
so as not to disturb the two
mugs idling on my windowsill.
let the paint stain. let spilled tea
galaxies bruise the white wood.
this porcelain memory
must remain untouched.

the platform is hazy with cold
air leaving cold bodies
a bloodless thing journeying
to somewhere warm and living
comes back out a nebula.
i take a mental note to buy
more mugs. i unlock my phone
and don't type anything.
st peter's square exhales.

i hug my bag to my chest
think about train tracks and
how i don't want to die anymore.
the man on the tram scratching
at invisible spiders in his eyes
drops the clear plastic baggy
and i hear porcelain shatter.
i'm glad i'm not the only one
who's keeping something quiet.

documentary on breadmaking

i saw another movie and we weren't in it

your buzz cut my finger tips
the screenplay didn't account for
us building a room
full of birds

up in your attic
i feel wing feathers flitting in my belly
and i don't think they could catch that on camera
the wonder i house
the humming of my mortal parts

bird flutter beat stop motion:
pick me up in your car light our roll ups
hand in back pocket confessions my
scorpio venus your hands shaking but
never on my throat we are not in the
cinema we spit on them i shave your
head you are all there ever is in mine

i don't want to be on television

i want to bake bread with you.
sticky dough finger prints on your cheeks
from when i stop the tiresome kneading
to hold your face in the fluorescence
just us and our shadows under kitchen light

i never want to give you crumbs
i want to give you an entire loaf
warm bread on the counter
every day
we bite through the crust
and laugh with our mouths full

recognition of the self and recognition of an/other

we in this gay club lights ablood lights ablued
romantic comedy special where you have just
almost thrown up from red stripe and weed yet
you giggle for 10 minutes when i call you cute
which means to say i see the undressed button of
your button down shirt i see the unfazed way you
lean back and rest your arm just so which means
to say woman how could i ever want anything but
this this this this this making unstrange this
scraping the suicidal shame from under my
fingernails before i touch you this shifting this
waxing this waxing lyrical isn't it making the up
to 60 percent of water in your body boil isn't it
making the skin melt off your musclefleshbone
drop by drop only for you to suddenly revel in the
curl of me licking your tongue to britney because i
don't know who could witness our drinking each
other and call it poison are they not watching me
mend am i not mending are these stage lights not
chasing each other to teach me how to fluoresce
glow a split second when we kiss am i not readying
myself to witness something yet unknown like you
to me and me to you and me to me and you to you

cut

the morning i was cut from my mother's belly,
they unwrapped the noose that fed me
three times
before i could scream.
i think children hold fear
in different parts of their body.

my hand used to hold hers like any daughter's ought to
and when i learned that i was bad,
i held that, too.
when i grew taller than her, i began shrinking.
after each day spent as her biggest regret,
i was needed to massage her feet in front of the tv.

i imagined a stranger's hands around her callouses
kneading the ball just under the big toe
of her left foot,
her right foot.
i pushed my spine into the back of the sofa
and when the show was over, i washed my hands.

i think children hold fear in the parts of their body
that remain small. the finger bones stretch
and the femurs thicken. but a young bundle of flesh
is still pulsating inside of me.
a tumour the size of a fist
against the stucco of my childhood bedroom.

say:

i won't cut the sick out of me. i'll coax it out delicately.

once, a doctor cradled an infant covered in blood
while unbinding its rope of nurture.
let me repeat what took place that morning
with my own two hands.

Joseph Hunter



Joseph Hunter lives in south Manchester, where he is lucky enough to have a small book-lined room and a large creaky armchair in which to write. Previously he lived and worked in London for ten years, which gave him a lot of material and a great desire to live somewhere other than London. He writes

Joseph Hunter

about, among other things, masculinity, desire, and friendship.

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The Birds that are Caught

After the opera Matthew knew he had to find a way of seeing Valentina again.

Tom gave him the opportunity. A few days after their piss up in the Finchley pub he asked if Matthew and Emily wanted to check out the Tate Modern late opening night with him and Valentina. Yes, said Matthew, they did. But Emily was busy that night. Matthew went anyway.

The long concrete ramp in Turbine Hall was dotted with groups of twenty-somethings. They sat together in cliques, swollen parodies of the school children that populated the Tate during daytime.

More young people crowded around a temporary bar. Matthew assumed that would be where he'd find Tom. Sure enough, there was his friend's broad-shouldered silhouette, a little apart from the crowd, gazing up at a glittering sculptural installation.

Matthew clapped a hand onto Tom's shoulder. Tom looked around as if he were waking up from sleep.

'Yes mate,' he mumbled.

'No Valentina?' said Matthew, trying to sound casual.

'Be here in five,' said Tom. He pointed at the glass structure. 'Wanna go in there?'

They joined the queue, which was moving quickly. Those who went inside the structure didn't stay very long,

emerging with the half-bemused, half-cheated look of those who have been failed by art, or feel that they have somehow failed it.

The interior was a labyrinth of short, narrow passageways made from mirrored glass. They wandered amongst a constellation of reflections – dozens, hundreds, thousands of Matthews and Toms. The structure was pristine, every glass surface spotless. The mirrors were distorted, some so subtle they had to examine each reflection carefully in order to identify what the fault was. The men looked at each other's reflections. One mirror showed Matthew with a slight fisheye effect so that as he leaned in his head ballooned to twice its normal size. Another was angled back so that as Tom walked closer he seemed to be ascending a slope. Another showed a true reflection of them both, but the glass had been treated with a gauzy substance so that their reflections looked back dimmed and vague, as if their eyes were failing while they looked at it. The distortions met with those of other mirrors so that the strangenesses merged and multiplied.

They stood outside the Switch House bar and watched Valentina approach, a shadow moving through pools of light. She was wearing a black leather jacket, black leggings, black boots. Only her face showed pale, framed by hair that hung loose around her shoulders. When she got near she ran at Tom, jumped into his arms and clung there before dropping to the ground and punching him in the chest.

'You don't get me a drink?' she said.

'Get it y'self,' said Tom. 'Been waiting ages for you.'

'Fine.'

Valentina flounced inside the bar. As she passed Matthew her eyes met his for a long, long moment.

She returned carrying a bottle of prosecco. Drank directly

from the bottle, then passed it to Matthew. The sour fizz stung his nose and the back of his throat on its way down.

Valentina began firing questions at the two men about what they'd seen.

'There was some hall of mirrors thing,' said Tom.

'A what?'

Tom started trying to explain. Valentina cut him off with a wave.

'Was it good?' she said, turning to Matthew.

'Erm, yeah,' said Matthew. He had no idea what he was going to say next, but felt compelled to continue speaking. 'I mean, being in a gallery is like being a kid, isn't it? You're surrounded by all these things you don't understand. You're sort of aware you have to behave a certain way, but part of you doesn't want to. You're bored half the time. This hall of mirrors was like a playground. For adults who feel like kids.'

Tom gave a derisive snort. Valentina was still staring at Matthew.

'You're so good at bullshitting, mate,' said Tom.

Valentina thrust the bottle at him.

'Shut up and drink this,' she said. She stepped back a little, appraising them. 'You two are so funny. You are like little boys together.'

Tom wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

'That's 'cos we *were* little boys together,' he said.

Valentina cackled. This time it was Matthew she punched in the chest, just as he was taking a swig of wine, causing him to spill it onto his jeans.

'And now you are big little boys,' she said.

Valentina was impatient to leave, distracted, not interested in the galleries. As at the opera, it seemed to Matthew as if she were less a person than a patchwork of romantic ideas. In all

her fidgeting talk and sudden laughter he imagined he saw a quiet uncertainty behind her bravado. Then the next moment's unpredictability would drive such thoughts from his mind. The Tate, in any case, seemed to hold little appeal for Valentina in spite of her oft-declared artistic inclinations. Matthew's summary of what he and Tom had seen was enough for her.

They left the Tate, wandered along Southbank until Valentina pulled them through the doors of a pub by the Globe Theatre. Inside, well-dressed groups of people sat at tables eating steaks by candlelight. Matthew, Tom and Valentina sat in a corner of the bar. Through the black grid of the latticed window across the bar Matthew could see the white-lit dome of St Paul's in the distance, towering over the glassy central London skyline against a dark purple sky.

Valentina's conversation was wild and ranging – sometimes accusatory, sometimes vague, sometimes exultant. Most of all it was unrelenting. Matthew tried to match Valentina's energy. At first, Tom did not. But after Valentina's second brief bathroom trip in the space of twenty minutes, he took something from her and made his own bathroom visit.

Valentina leaned in close towards Matthew.

'Do you do coke?' she whispered.

Do I, wondered Matthew. He'd done it once with Tom many years ago. A night of strange bravery, running up fire escapes, shouting in the street. Hours of frenzied conversation with strangers they'd met.

'Yeah,' he said, 'of course.'

Valentina sat back, crossed one leg over the other.

'You like art,' she said. It wasn't a question. 'He does not,' she added, nodding in the general direction of where Tom had gone.

Matthew began to protest. Valentina interrupted him.

‘No, no, he does not. But you do. You are like me.’

Unsure of what to say, unwilling to question her, Matthew held her gaze for what felt like minutes on end. The darkness of her eyes seemed to draw him in. Then Valentina smiled. A warm, slow smile, without her usual knowing aura. She looked almost childlike.

Tom sat back down beside them. Reached out his hand low under the table, towards Matthew. They touched palms, and a paper wad passed into Matthew’s hand.

They walked along Southbank. Lights streamed across Southwark Bridge above them. They passed underneath it and walked through the streets around Borough Market, skirting piles of swollen bin bags. Valentina was preoccupied with her phone, receiving minute by minute updates about the delivery of more coke. Tom and Matthew breathed deep together, talked about shared history. At the back of Matthew’s mind was the idea that they were surrounded by dozens of other people who were just out of sight, and a chorus of supporting voices.

In the taxi travelling west to Valentina’s flat, Matthew watched the streets, houses, and parks passing by, floating past and then vanishing again like the ghostly procession of half-formed ideas in his mind.

Valentina’s flat was as Tom had described, large and expensively furnished with designer chairs and marble worktops. It was sparse, too, with empty bookshelves and a couple of generic pictures on the wall hung by the landlord or letting agent. Matthew had expected... a statement, perhaps. A personal touch. Something other than the temporary accommodation of a rich girl on her way to grander things.

Valentina dropped her bag, opened the fridge and took out a bottle of prosecco.

'Music,' she said, over her shoulder.

Tom picked up an iPad from the coffee table.

'Turn that on for me man,' he said to Matthew.

Matthew switched on the wireless speaker, then sat in an armchair made from chrome tubing and brown leather.

Valentina breezed over to them, bottle in one hand and three glasses in the other. She'd gathered her hair up into a loose bun on top of her head, a strand or two escaping, falling across her face. These she flicked aside impatiently as she poured the wine.

'What d'you want?' said Tom, flicking at the tablet screen.

'Beautiful music,' said Valentina, handing Matthew a glass.

Music from Matthew's teenage years rippled from the speaker behind his head. He looked at Tom to find his friend grinning at him.

'They're playing Field Day this year,' said Tom.

Matthew sat up.

'No *way*. We should go,' he said.

'Let's do it man,' said Tom, nodding.

Valentina took two coke wraps from her pocket and dropped them onto the table, then stood up as if sitting was unpleasant to her. She stomped into the hallway and disappeared into her bedroom. Her voice came echoing through the apartment.

'Something classic, not this.'

Tom shook his head, but changed the music.

Valentina re-emerged carrying a large wall mirror. She laid it onto the coffee table, face up, then perched on the arm of the sofa and racked three lines of coke onto the surface of the glass. The new coke was rocky. As she crushed it with a credit card, she gave Tom the name of an Italian musician.

‘Do you have a note?’ she asked as she tidied up the lines. The way she said it was quiet, gentle – somehow intimate, the way another couple might have talked about picking up milk or remembering to feed the cat.

As Tom checked his pockets, Matthew held out his tubed note between thumb and forefinger. Valentina took it from him and in a single movement lowered her head and snorted one of the lines.

Matthew knelt by the mirror. As he looked down, he saw his pale reflection looming up from below. This time the coke stung his nose. He imagined he could feel some of the larger grains scraping the soft tissue as they went in.

The bigger line hit fast. Matthew was soon filled with a trembling joy he had no use for. The Italian pop music stopped sounding trite and became true, each of the separate layers crystallising as he listened.

They smoked cigarettes, and smoking felt like breathing a richer air. Time seemed to move more slowly, even pause, and Matthew had the sense that the three of them were floating together in an indeterminate space.

They said things to one another, talked over each other, too. All three of them were full of grand statements, full of praise even if they could only put it in the vaguest terms. They had great faith in each other, in the promise each of them showed in every word and action, and they congratulated each other for being as they were and promised they would be always.

But underneath the exultation, the waves of joy that rose and fell with each new line, part of Matthew remained detached, calculating. A kind of lizard brain.

He saw that they were strange together, Tom and Valentina. Quite different, perhaps even opposites. The physical intimacy between them that Matthew had sometimes

been troubled by was now absent. They sat apart, and although Valentina was full of great words of praise for Tom she would often turn away from him as she spoke, looking towards Matthew.

Matthew watched Valentina, nurtured the desire he felt for her. He examined every part of her body that he could see, felt a cold joy when she seemed to see him do it and open out under his gaze, preening. Tom seemed not to notice anything.

Where had this change between Tom and Valentina come from, Matthew wondered. From Tom? From Valentina? In truth he didn't care. Emily was nothing more than a vague, insubstantial idea he pushed to the back of his mind. All he knew or felt he knew was that there was a great inheritance that was due to him.

So closely did he watch Valentina, in fact, that it was some time before he realised that Tom was withdrawing from them, lying back on the sofa, now and then jabbing a finger at the tablet in response to some request from Valentina.

Noticing this, Matthew tried to bring Tom back to them again, reminiscing with him about school days and music. Valentina, excluded from the conversation for five minutes or so, racked up three more lines and then, after snorting hers, got up from the sofa and walked over to the sliding doors that lead onto the balcony. She opened the doors and stepped outside, her boots clacking on the steel balcony floor. She half-closed the sliding doors and leaned over the balcony railing, looking down into the courtyard below.

Matthew ran out of what he was saying. He and Tom both snorted a line from the mirror. As he felt the now-familiar warm surge, Matthew contemplated his friend. Tom was twitchy, wide-eyed. Matthew realised he must look the same.

'So,' said Matthew, lowering his voice 'how's it going with...?'

Tom scratched the back of his head.

'She's too much, man,' he said.

'You mean the coke?' said Matthew.

'Sort of. Not really. She's just...'

Out on the balcony Valentina was a dark shape against the darker night. She was dancing, her back to Matthew and Tom, arms stretched above her head, moving her hips from side to side, twisting her hands at the wrists as if she were trying to unscrew the sky.

Matthew was sitting on the toilet, staring at his phone. How long have I been transfixed, he wondered. He'd come into the bathroom some time ago, started looking at his phone, and then...

His heart was pounding. He was extremely high, but it was as if he'd broken through to something different. Why hadn't they come to check on him? Matthew flushed the toilet, washed his hands, checked his face in the mirror, and left the bathroom.

In the middle of the hallway was a discarded boot. Through the doorway, Matthew saw a second boot in the middle of the living room floor. The music was still playing, but the room was empty.

The bedroom door was closed. As Matthew walked closer, he heard muffled female laughter and a deep male answering voice. He walked quickly past the door and into the living room.

He stood for a moment looking at the empty wine glasses, the empty bottles, the full ashtray, the upturned mirror on the table.

The open wrap of cocaine.

As he knelt in front of the table, he heard more sounds from the bedroom.

Matthew let himself into his flat, taking care to make as little noise as possible. He undressed, slipped into the bed beside Emily, who was asleep. Facing away from him, as always. She didn't stir, even when he tugged some of the duvet off her to cover himself.

He lay on his back, stared at the ceiling. His heart was still pounding but had lost the feeling of certainty he'd had earlier. Fear was starting to claw at the edges of the room. When he closed his eyes, sexual fantasies filled his mind, following their own logic, resolving into visions of strange faces that loomed out of grey space.

Matthew picked up his phone and scrolled through Instagram. Skimmed past something, retraced, found it again. A blurry, black-and-white photo of a long shadow across a pavement. The caption was a quote in Italian.

La bellezza si risveglia l'anima di agire

He opened Valentina's photo feed. Most of the photos she posted did not contain her, or if they did, only in partial glimpses. A strand of black hair, half a smile. A pale face reflected in a window.

Matthew closed Instagram, opened his app store, typed something into the search bar. Once the download had finished he opened the dating app. There was a search option.

His thumb hovered over the screen. He typed in 'valentina', pressed search again. A handful of results, none of them her. But she wouldn't use her real name. It would be...

Matthew reopened Valentina's most recent Instagram post. He copied the caption, then pasted it into a blank browser.

Dante. Of course. He reopened the dating app and wrote 'dante' in the keywords box.

Fewer results this time. Matthew scrolled, feeling whatever urgency remained ebbing away. Maybe he should try to sleep, or...

There.

He held the phone close. Profile name: figliadidante. Age: 23. Location: West London. The preview image was small, but there was no mistaking those eyes.

Matthew opened Valentina's profile. There were three photos. A close-up of her face, half-hidden by strands of hair. A three-quarter shot of her upper body as she stood behind a bar, probably back in Rome, pouring herself a drink, wearing a white minidress with gossamer thin straps, hair gathered in a loose high bun. A full-length rear shot, the sea and sky beyond, black bikini bottoms, a light dusting of sand across her buttocks, a loose mass of hair tumbling down her tanned back.

Under her profile photo was a small pink button with an envelope icon on it.

A beautiful and strange vision of Valentina formed in Matthew's mind and he wrote it down. When he finished writing he paused for a moment. He did not reread what he'd written. He could still see the vision clearly and knew he had described it as it was. Instead he just waited, to see if something would change.

Nothing changed. He pressed send.

So that's how easy it is to do something irreversible, he thought.

Erin MacNamara



Erin MacNamara grew up in Derbyshire before moving to London to study History. Her first story, aged 10, was a collaboration with her sister and their cousin about the woods near their grandparents' house, featuring three characters with a suspiciously close resemblance to the authors. She has since written about talking cats, witches, haunted houses and

changelings, and her writing tends towards a political magic realism. She is interested in fairy tales and folklore, and in walking the fine line between vivid description and blatant self-indulgence. She is slightly confused about her current tendency to feature rural landscapes in her writing, and thinks perhaps while in London she missed the countryside more than she realised.

Erin is currently working on a novel set in a dystopian future, exploring privacy, free will and the ethics of revolutions.

She works in a theatre, but finds it much too strange to write about.

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What the Fire Gave Me

They're coming for me in the morning.

I've got some time until then, I'd judge it five or six hours by the light. Time enough to think. How I came to be here, where I might be bound for after. I hope there is an after. Maybe I'll see Tommy again. Lord, let me see Tommy again. If I reach out my hand, I can feel his cheek soft under my fingertips. If I close my eyes I can feel him holding me, lying in the grass to watch the sun set behind the hill. My Tommy.

We weren't foolish, but we were unlucky - it happens - and when it happened to us we never thought it would matter. We had a plan. Put money by for a license and a place to live, quick as we could, and then we could be wed. People might start counting back, gossip for a time, but it would die down soon enough. We had all kinds of plans, me and Tommy, used to dream up the future lying on the hillside. They made us so happy, those plans. It's strange it should hurt so much to think on them now.

I try to think of other things instead. I've been using the bricks in the wall to note how long I've been here. Today's brick is in the second row down. Day 27. It has a line running through it, darker grey than the rest. It seems almost too obvious an omen. If I stand in the middle of my cell with my arms stretched out I can touch the sides with both hands. It's longer the other way, long enough for me to lie down flat, but

if I do there's only a foot to spare. It's a Margaret-sized room, just like a coffin. It seems to have been built to contain me.

I wish I had the power they accuse me of. If I was a witch I could bring back Tommy, and the baby. I could conjure up a place for us to live, away from all this. Somewhere we could be left alone.

That would be nice.

*

We'd tried our best, but we weren't going to have enough money before I started to show. We were getting desperate, which is why he did it. Poor Tommy. He should have talked to me, told me what he was going to do. I was always the one who made the plans, and for good reason. He never was the sharpest, my Tommy, but he loved us so much. I loved him so much.

They're easy buildings to get into, churches – they keep the doors open for any who might have need of them. It might make you wonder why more things don't get stolen, if all that fancy stuff is so easy to reach. It turns out, as Tommy should have guessed, that church candlesticks are impossible to sell. No pawnbroker with the slightest ounce of self-preservation is going to side with a hungry-looking thatcher's son over the Church. It was very, very easy to trace the candlesticks back to our parish, and then Tommy was in real trouble because the second thing he hadn't thought of was how angry the Church gets when you steal from them.

Except in this case they weren't angry. They were far, far worse. Anger might have been all right. Anger that meant the stocks, even a fine. We'd have survived that. But Tommy didn't get angry. He got mercy.

*

When I was twelve years old, a sickness went around our little town. It took a lot of people, my mother and father among them. It also took the baker's daughter, so they needed an extra pair of hands. It was hard work, but it was distracting, and as it got easier I found I didn't need so much distraction anyway. They were good folk, Mr. Thompson and his wife – they fed me and clothed me, and on Sundays after church Mrs. Thompson taught me my letters. And after my reading lesson they would both fall asleep before the fire, and I would sneak out to meet Tommy.

I would climb up out of our town and into the hills, and he would step out of the woods and meet me on the path. We would walk through the valley or sit by the river, watch the sun set. It was so lovely up there, and it felt like ours alone. When the sun shone you've never seen grass greener, or sky bluer. The light on the water was more beautiful than any rich lady's jewels. I would sit by the river, letting the water run through my fingers while Tommy talked to me, and it would feel like home. I always felt at home near water. Even when the sky was grey there was a grace to the way the colours muted. As if the green of the grass and the orange of the leaves were mourning the sun. It was all we had, that valley, but it was ours. Our little world, bounded by a ring of hills.

And now Tommy's far, far away from their cradle-safety, and I'm trapped right in the middle and can't see the sky.

*

They said it wasn't Tommy's fault. They said they understood his reasons, that he was a young lad with a future that shouldn't be taken away from him. They said it was clear

what had happened. Tommy had been seduced by a wicked girl, with no morals and no decency, and stealing the candlesticks showed honour and responsibility. I felt the anger rising up inside me when I heard that, a hot, rushing feeling. I felt like screaming. I felt like dragging them up to our hillside, showing them the setting sun, asking them how that could ever be wicked. The fury flooded me, the way they tried to twist it with official words and make it wrong.

He tried to tell them, but they wouldn't listen. He told them how he loved me, he loved us, we had plans. He said he was sorry for the candlesticks. He even said he'd pay a fine, though I've no notion where we would have found the money. They just laughed, fatherly, as if Tommy were pretending in order to save my face. They didn't believe him, and it burned inside me. They sent him away to the navy, signed to a ship from Liverpool. He wrote for a while – well, he'd tell someone what it was he wanted written, and they'd put it down for me. The ports they stopped at, sights and sounds, new lands and people. Ship routines, and the smell of the sea. I've never seen the sea. I'm hardly like to now. He would tell me how much he missed us.

They were never regular, those letters, so I didn't know anything was wrong until they cornered me in the town square. Five lads. I'd seen them around before, labourers on one of the farms, come into town to find some entertainment on their afternoon off. They came towards me from all sides, and I didn't know what was happening until they were in a wall before me. I was confused at first, tried to get past them. One of them shoved me back, and then the jeering started. Dead man's whore, they called me. I didn't understand – what dead man? They told me how the ship had gone down, no survivors, how they had overheard it from a traveller who stopped in the inn. How it meant that I was truly on my own.

‘No,’ I said. ‘No, no,’ over and over. It was all I could say. It was all I could feel, a resounding negative, the only response to the sudden shattering of the world. They kept calling me names, but I barely heard. I was trying to sink deep inside my ‘no’, sure that if I denied their words long enough they would cease to be true. Perhaps my quiet was a spark to them. They started hitting me. I think one of them had a stick – I’m not sure. When they tired of hitting me they wandered off, as if it had meant nothing, leaving me lying in the mud alone.

It wasn’t until I got back to the bakery that I realised it wasn’t just mud soaking my legs.

The Thompsons threw me out after that – they said they couldn’t stand the shame. They had turned a blind eye to the pregnancy, but a public scene like that was a step too far. As if they had been the ones hurt. As if they had been the ones blinded by tears and mud and blood and pain. As if they had had to bury – anything. I’ll not go there, not even in my own mind. I buried the memory as well.

It was Mrs. Waverley who took me in. She’d just had her baby, and she said she needed help around the house. Mr. Waverley didn’t seem to like it, but while he did not share his wife’s kindness for strays he loved her enough to humour it. I can understand why he did what he did.

There wasn’t much I could do in the way of housework for the first few weeks, but I could sit in a corner with the mending and fix up hems and tears. It felt nice to be able to fix something. It was a while before I could help with the baby. It was a while before I could even look at the baby.

They said I was jealous of Mrs. Waverley. Jealous because she had a baby and I didn’t.

Of course I was jealous. They were so happy, the three of them, a proper little family. Like we should have been. But I never would have hurt them. Mrs. Waverley was so kind to

me, and Mr. Waverley was never worse than indifferent. I even loved the baby – Catherine, she was called. Day by day it got easier to be around her. She was a lovely baby, but she never was very strong. She used to gurgle at me and swipe at my hair. I used to sing her the songs I would have sung to our baby. I cannot understand why they would think I could hurt her. How anyone could have hurt her. But then, grief can fog your mind in funny ways.

She started losing weight, the baby, and then the coughing started. She stopped her gurgling laugh, and even when she cried it hadn't force anymore. The paler and thinner she got, the paler and thinner Mrs. Waverley got – she used to spend her whole day rocking in the chair holding the baby, and I would rush around the house. I would cook and clean and mend, pick herbs for Mrs. Waverley and the baby. They said I resented it, the work I had to do.

When the baby died, Mrs. Waverley stopped talking. I can't blame Mr. Waverley, truly I can't. He wanted someone to blame, and I understand that, I do. But the magistrate wasn't struck blind by grief. He hadn't lost anything, and he was in no pain. He had no reason, no reason at all to accept the stricken accusations of a man trying to find some answer for his suffering. No reason to put words in my mouth, resentment and jealousy, arrest me and throw me in here, none that I can see. No reason not to believe me.

No reason other than that this cell was the only place he could think of to put me. People used to look at me out of the corner of their eye at the market – I think they thought I wasn't ashamed enough. A fallen woman, with no business holding her head up in public or being treated with respect by decent people like the Waverleys.

I hadn't a place out there, so they've made me one of my very own. Perfectly Margaret-sized.

*

I can hear footsteps.

Loud footsteps, and clattering keys.

Men I've known my whole life. Will Taverner, the smith, and John Pollock who runs the inn. We don't have real guards in our little town – there's not ever anyone or anything as needs guarding. I wonder if the magistrate has sent these two men, built like walls the both of them, to scare me, or because they themselves are scared. Because suddenly I'm scared. I back away into the furthest corner of my cell, try to shrink into the stones, and they advance on me, seize an arm each and drag me from the place that suddenly seems a safe haven.

In the square they've built a stake, a huge nest of wood with a post rising from the middle. I can feel the wind on my face, scarce though it might be, and a small part of me is thankful, even now. I look up at Taverner, then Pollock, and that's when I realise it for sure – *they're* scared of *me*. Even though there's nothing I could do to them.

Tommy and the baby, the boys in the square, Mrs. Waverley – it's all boiling up inside me. The anger helps a little – enough to show Taverner a savage, leery snarl. The look of fear flickering across his face brings me a bite of satisfaction, and it washes through my chest even as they shove me down and I fall hard, scudding my hands on the ground. I turn them over and see ribbons of blood and flecks of gravel. It hurts a lot for something that can't possibly matter, considering what my last moments will hold. I can feel my pulse in the palms of my hands.

When they haul me back up again I try to struggle, kick out and spit, but they don't seem to feel it.

'Let me go!' I yell. 'Taverner, please – Pollock – let me go,

let me GO!' It feels like someone has built a fire inside me, but there's nowhere for the smoke to get out.

They lift me onto the platform, tie me tight to the stake. I can feel it splintery against my wrists. I open my mouth again to yell, but Pollock cuffs me hard about the ear. It seems he's remembered that even witches can be hurt like other women.

Father McCarthy is walking across the square, the crowd parting before him like the Red Sea. He's wearing his best vestments, the ones with the golden edging, and it's catching in the sun. He starts chanting, holding the prayer book out before him like a barrier between us. Father McCarthy, who I've known my whole life, who baptised me and buried my parents. Father McCarthy who would have wed me and Tommy. He comes to stand before my stake, alongside the magistrate. It looks like they're attending me, like I'm some lady they have to bow before. It almost makes me laugh. The magistrate begins to speak.

'Margaret Lorrimer, you stand accused of the crime of heresy. On the twenty-fifth day of the third month in the year of our lord 1524 you did use ungodly magic to curse the woman Waverley, killing her infant child. Your jealousy and your wantonness drove you into the path of Satan, and let your weakness be a lesson to all. Margaret Lorrimer, you have been found guilty of this heresy and are sentenced to die, by being burnt at the stake. Do you have anything to say for yourself?'

'I never did!' I say. 'Please, believe me, I swear to you I know no magic! I never hurt Mrs. Waverley, I'm not a witch, *please!* Believe me, why won't you believe me?' I'm shouting by the end, but it makes no difference. The faces in the crowd are smiling tightly, jeering, convinced of their own rightness, convinced they are making the world that bit better. They don't believe me. They won't believe me. They've decided

what I am and what I deserve. Fear rushes through me, shortening my breath. I try to think of all the things witches can't do. I dig my nails into my torn palms, feel the blood run over my fingers. I try to turn them outwards, struggling against my bonds, try to show my weakness.

'I have no power, you have to believe me! I'm not a witch! Please, please, I beg of you, let me go!' My voice is growing hoarse.

I struggle against the ropes but they're tied too well. Pulling at them only seems to make them tighter. With every plea, my voice rasps harsh against my throat. At the back of the square Taverner and Pollock are picking up torches. They light them and begin to walk. I summon a deep breath and make a last effort to prove myself.

'Pater noster, qui es in caelis...'

But the smoke from the torches is curling towards me now, and the prayer dies in my throat.

They reach the platform.

I struggle against the ropes again, even though I know it won't make any difference. I imagine my fury flowing through me and washing them away. It's rising in me like a flood, this anger, consuming me, but I can't move, can't expel it anywhere. All I can do is throw my head back and scream. Taverner and Pollock hold their torches to the wood. The magistrate looks solemn, as if he is the one suffering from this ordeal. He closes his book.

'Margaret Lorrimer, I sentence you to death. May God have mercy on your soul.'

The wood catches, the smoke rising until everything appears before me through a veil. I scream again, the only thing I can do now. I imagine my voice escaping my body, flying up and away, living a life of its own among the birds and the trees, up where the river ran swift and Tommy and I

used to watch the sun set. I can see the hills, past the roofs of the town. I wonder if I'll see Tommy again. Lord, let me see Tommy again.

The flames are growing. They're coming and there's nothing I can do. The anger seems to have reached a new height - I'm shaking, and I'm certain it's not from fear. I feel like I need to smash something, break something, to release this rising storm inside me. I only have one thing left to me. I scream, louder than even before, let it all go, throw everything I have to the wind.

There's a sound coming from outside the square. It's loud, and getting louder; I can hear it clearly over the flames and the jeering. It's a building, rushing sort of noise, and through the smoke I can see people in the crowd turning.

I can feel the heat all around me like a cage. It shimmers before me. The flames have not reached me yet, but I feel as though I am burning all the same. It's so hot. I don't know if the water running down my face is sweat or tears. The noise is roaring now, getting closer. It seems to be pressing in on me, like the heat.

A wall of water crashes into the square and something inside me breaks, breathes. The anger starts to fade, as though it's found some way of escape. The water rushes into the crowd, flinging them asunder like dolls. It's coming towards me, but it's too late. The fire is at my feet, a pain so great I can't even feel it. My whole body has become one with the flames. Around me people are screaming, scrambling for safety. I smile.

I close my eyes.

James Brady



James Brady is a writer based in the North West. Raised in Skelmersdale, he later moved to Liverpool, gaining a B.A. (Hons) in History from Liverpool John Moores University. Always a storyteller, he eventually succumbed to his true passion, enrolling at the University of Manchester to study Creative Writing. Although he has a keen interest in the forms of poetry

and screenwriting, James' favoured form is prose fiction. Once a fantasy writer, he now prefers writing contemporary realistic fiction, focusing on stories which centre on the family and relationship issues that we all experience.

James's novel-in-progress, *Proud Titania*, focuses on newly married couple, Dionisie and Iris Eremia, whose relationship becomes strained after Iris's difficult and neurotic mother comes to live with them for a period of time. The extract provided is one of the earlier chapters, when Mary-Margaret arrives for her stay at the couple's flat.

The wider narrative centres on the growing tension between Dionisie and his mother-in-law, and the downward spiral of the trio's relationship during her stay.

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Proud Titania

5

The front door to the apartment flew open, thumping the wall of Iris's hallway as she slipped in behind her mother. Dionisie barely caught a glimpse of Marguerite Wallis's face as she marched towards him before a pair of thin arms wrapped themselves around his body.

'It's so lovely to properly meet you!' Her wet lips pressed against his stubble, leaving a red smudge of lipstick, before she released her grip and turned back to Iris. 'He's a lot more handsome than he sounded over the phone.'

'So, my voice is unattractive, is it?' Dionisie teased. He had spent most of his life worrying about whether he had an unattractive face, never an unattractive voice.

'Don't worry, I'll smooth out the creases in no time,' Marguerite said, adjusting his collar maternally. Iris clearly hadn't heard her mother, whose staring had become uncomfortably prolonged as her deep blue eyes moved slowly from Dionisie's white collar up to his thin stubble, past his large nose and back to his brown eyes again, forming her painted lips back into a large smile.

He paused for a minute, taking his first real look at Marguerite Wallis. She appeared a lot different to the young girl he had first seen in the old Wallis family portrait. She was very tall and extremely slender, yet not exactly in a way a

woman would envy. It was like she had just recovered from a bout of salmonella poisoning and was still trying to regain the weight she had lost during the illness. She towered over Iris, looking to Dionisie like a praying mantis must look to an ant, with her lime green dress only accentuating the image. Her eyes were very large, with too much distance between them, and positioned themselves above a pair of high, angular cheekbones. He didn't quite know what to say to her, unable to mention their wedding – which Iris still hadn't told her about.

'I thought now would be the best time for me to stay, what with January out of the way. These winter months can be so depressing.' Marguerite ran a hand through her bleached auburn hair that didn't quite meet her scalp as it sat below at least an inch of thick grey wisps. 'Hopefully it gave you something to look forward to anyway. I need to properly get to know the man my daughter's so smitten about.'

'Well, we can do that now!' he grinned, while trying to hide his tobacco stained teeth. He slowly moved with her through their hallway to the open living area that was flooded in golden light from the large windows.

'You know, I've had a lot of very wealthy men interested in my daughter over the years, but she's never reciprocated it. You must be something special.' She looked at Iris again, who was following behind them into the living area. 'And sweetheart, you didn't tell me he had such a pronounced *accent*.'

Iris stepped beside her husband as they all gathered into the room, and placed a warm hand on his arm.

'We went through all this on the phone about Dionisie being Romanian. You've already spoken to him a few times anyway!'

'I know but it hits the ear differently in person!' She

laughed, throwing her head back dramatically as she did so. 'Of course it doesn't matter but it does explain why I've had so much trouble with his name.' She was looking directly at Iris, who was standing on the other side of Dionisie, making him feel like the family cat.

'It's pronounced DEE-on-NYE-see,' he interjected, saying it more slowly than he normally would.

'Once more?'

'*Dionisie.*'

He felt Iris's hand grasp his arm tightly, unsure as to whether it was to quash his own growing frustration or hers.

'Dionassie? Is that right?' She was now staring at him in complete concentration, overloaded by her own set of possible pronunciations.

He chuckled to ensure everything remained light-hearted.

'DEE-on-NYE-see.'

She threw her delicate hands up in defeat, shaking her head. 'I'm not going to get this, am I?'

'It's fine, just call me Dion.'

'No,' Iris interrupted, loosening her grip. 'I'm sure my mother can learn to pronounce it. For god's sake, it's *Dionisie.*'

'Iris, there's no need to be rude to me, I'm just having trouble with it!' She composed herself as if she was about to conduct a sermon. 'And don't use the Lord's name in vain.'

Iris was tapping her heeled shoes against the wooden floor in agitation, perfectly matching the rhythm of the ticking clock on the living room wall.

'*DEE-on-NYE-see.*' Her face glowed.

'There, you've got it!'

'*Dionisie,*' she repeated, once more for good measure. He nodded forcefully, keeping his face smooth and happy, just thankful she had actually said it.

‘Now that’s over with, I’ll bring your luggage in here, Marguerite.’ Dionisie made a point of pronouncing her own name loud and clear. He still couldn’t fully understand how the name Marguerite was apparently much easier to say than Dionisie.

‘Keeping in line with all this name business you both should know, I’ve actually changed *my* name!’

Iris sighed just quietly enough for only Dionisie to hear as she went to help him with the luggage still sitting back in their hallway. She had warned him that it was not unlike her mother to have spells of reinvention every now and then.

‘You’ve changed it legally? To what?’

‘Not yet, but I plan to.’ She cleared her throat loudly, not aiding either of them with her bags. ‘I’ve changed it to Mary-Margaret.’

‘You couldn’t have picked something shorter?’

Dionisie thought it best to remain silent. Mary-Margaret has five syllables. Dionisie has four syllables. *Interesting*, he thought.

‘Double-barrelled names have so much class to them. They’re associated with aristocracy.’

‘Yeah for surnames. Not first names, mother!’ Dionisie noticed that Iris sighed a lot when talking to her mother.

‘Dionyassie? Do you like it?’ she inquired, watching them both carry in her bags.

He managed to suppress a wince at her address.

‘Yes, it’s very nice.’

‘You don’t have to call her that, by the way.’

‘Yes he does, and so does everyone from now on! I won’t respond to anything else,’ Mary-Margaret declared.

Iris shrugged her shoulders in surrender, knowing her mother’s stubbornness would always win, no arguments. It didn’t really matter either way to Dionisie. He thought it best

to embrace her eccentricities, considering she was staying with them for a while.

'I did a lot of thinking in France and decided that I needed to come back to England anew!'

Dionisie brought in the last small bag that had been perched beside its larger twin.

'Marguerite has never really felt right to me, it holds too much of the past now.'

'If it makes you happy, mother, it's fine. You don't have to justify anything.'

Mary-Margaret nodded meekly, looking down at her fingers, which were carefully entwined with one another.

'Now, tell me all about how you two met again!'

*

The late afternoon had evolved into dusk and Mary-Margaret had finally crammed most of her belongings in the limited storage space there was in the spare room. Dionisie had left Iris to help her, feeling it wasn't his place to inspect his mother-in-law's possessions, most of which were clothes. She had a very particular fashion that appeared more suitable for evenings on a cruise ship than a casual stay at her daughter's flat. It consisted mainly of silk and satin gowns, alongside various furs, but deciding as to whether they were faux or real was not Dionisie's area of expertise. Either way, he cringed whenever she summoned him back in the room to look at an expensive piece of clothing from her collection.

After the endless furs and fabrics had been stored away, they were finally sat around the small dining table before dinner. Iris had entrusted herself to cook Sunday dinner for her mother and Dionisie. She insisted on doing it alone so the

two of them could become better acquainted, yet this proved futile. Mary-Margaret hovered around the kitchen, looking into the oven through the steamed glass and examining every movement Iris made on the hob, throwing out commands disguised with just enough inflection to make them suggestive. The scene did not have the warmth of when Dionisie used to watch his mother and sister Alina cook in Bucharest when they were kids, their shadows flickering against the orange glow of the candlelight, with Alina stood on her tiptoes, watching their mother prepare a meal from whatever the food rations allowed her to. They laughed as they diced pigeon-sized chickens, juggled bags of flour that had passed their expiration dates, and hummed songs that Alexandra had taught her children before Ceaușescu's propaganda dominated the radio.

Iris's silent stirring and tense shoulders only confirmed the unpleasantness. He knew she was probably craving a glass of wine but, out of respect for her mother's teetotalism, was coping with a mug of tea instead. Dionisie was struggling desperately with his own cravings. He needed a cigarette, as nail-biting and foot-tapping were not satisfactory substitutes.

'Iris, I think you better check the broccoli again.' Mary-Margaret, who was perfectly capable of checking it herself, was staring over the pot as Iris was kneeling down to examine the roast beef in the oven.

Iris groaned loudly. It was time to get her mother off her back.

'Want some more coffee, Mary-Margaret?' Dionisie asked.

'No, thank you.' She drained the contents of the mug that she had been cradling with both hands.

'You know mother,' Iris said, pulling herself up after checking the roast potatoes. 'Dionisie can read coffee grounds.'

Mary-Margaret scoffed as she quickly peeked over the hob again.

'My father taught me. It's very popular back in Romania.'

'It's nonsense, all that stuff is. The tarot cards and palm reading,' she stated, shaking her head. 'How can any of those things possibly predict the future?'

'It's just a bit of fun, Mary-Margaret. I can read yours one time if you want?'

Dionisie poured boiling water into his mug as Iris fumbled about for a distraction, finding it in the roast potatoes again, and pretended not to listen.

'No, don't be silly,' She wasn't snickering anymore, now only eyeing him with the same severity as his old high school headmistress. 'I don't want to be a part of any witchcraft.'

Mary-Margaret's thin fingers were twisting the silver crucifix around her neck. One, two, three times clockwise then back around in the other direction.

'Some people look to God for answers, I look to coffee grounds.'

His mother-in-law glared at him. He had touched some pious nerve which even Iris couldn't ignore.

'Mother, I forgot to say!' Iris dragged herself up again, rising between them, Dionisie wearing a crooked smile, Mary-Margaret in thin-lipped fury. 'I loved that coat you showed me today, where'd you get it?'

Mary-Margaret immediately broke eye contact with Dionisie and, wearing a large smile, rushed out of the kitchen to get it.

The two of them began to set out three plates, starting to arrange the food.

'Dionisie, please don't provoke her like that.'

He pulled the potato tray out of the oven, the steel burning his hands through the red tea towel.

‘I wasn’t provoking her, I just didn’t like the way she-’

‘Here it is!’ Mary-Margaret appeared back in the kitchen again, cutting his words short. ‘I only wear it on special occasions, like to parties or *weddings*.’

She began to perform a box waltz step with the coat, holding the sleeve high in the air as she danced about. The coat was black and covered in thick fur which looked more coarse than comfortable.

‘Alastair Warren-Haynes gave it to me, he was an old friend of your father’s, remember? It’s genuine monkey fur!’

Dionisie tried to subdue his disgust at Mary-Margaret as she paraded the fur coat around, trying to remember why he vaguely recognised the name.

‘What? When?’ Iris inquired, dishing out the food.

‘Oh, he gave it to me a long time ago. It was his mother’s in the nineteen-forties.’ Mary-Margaret ended her waltz and embraced the coat.

‘I think fur looks better on the animal myself,’ Dionisie said. He sliced the tender pink insides of the beef that was speckled with a myriad of seasonings, and settled it on the different plates.

Mary-Margaret swatted the fur, vigorously dusting some unseen fibres off the dead animal’s hair.

‘Well, those monkeys would be dead now regardless. Anyway, at least they’re entrusted to someone who cares for them.’ She violently dusted it one last time. ‘Consider it a form of *recycling*.’

Dionisie kept silent, ignoring her justifications as he handed the first plate to Iris.

‘I always remember I was teaching my year nine class when that happened with Alastair,’ Iris said, walking with her mother’s plate of food over to the kitchen table as Mary-

Margaret lay her coat on the arm of the sofa. 'I only found out because all the kids were talking about it.'

'It was international news after all. Poor Alastair was put under so much stress.'

The chair squealed as Mary-Margaret pulled it out, perching on the end of it with flawless posture.

Dionisie joined them with his food at the table.

'What's this about again?'

Mary-Margaret flattened out a silk napkin over her lap.

'A tragic, terrible *accident*.'

'Well, an accident that was waiting to happen,' Iris interrupted, finally sitting down to join them so they could start their meals. 'Alastair Warren-Haynes owned this pet chimpanzee. It just went crazy one afternoon and killed one of his cleaners.'

'That was it! God, that was horrible,'

'Please don't talk with food in your mouth,' Mary-Margaret grimaced. She was concentrating hard on slicing the beef.

He complied, swallowing his mouthful before continuing.

'I can't believe you knew the guy,' Dionisie said, shaking his head. 'And it didn't just kill that poor woman though, it ripped her face off!'

Mary-Margaret's fork screeched across the porcelain painfully.

'But they didn't have to shoot him!' she said. 'Bernie was always so gentle whenever I saw him. I still think she must have provoked him somehow.'

'I don't think it was anyone's fault, mother,' Iris shrugged. 'He had that chimp for twelve years, I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner.' Iris poured herself a glass of water from the jug on the table and Dionisie knew she was praying for it to turn into wine. 'Chimpanzees are so dangerous, he should never have kept one as a pet.'

‘Julia, his mother, was always known to keep exotic pets,’ Mary-Margaret said, pouring herself a glass too with a noticeable tremor. ‘Besides, a pet is a pet. Plenty of dogs have killed people!’

‘Owning a dog is a lot different than owning a chimp. It’s legal to, for starters,’ Dionisie said. ‘Did Alastair even go to prison? Guessing his wealth helped soften the blow.’

‘Well, he was eighty and almost completely blind. His estate had to pay the woman’s family millions,’ Iris explained.

Mary-Margaret slammed her glass down, sending a vibration through the oak table.

‘Alastair was horrified, actually. I still think the stress is what killed him!’

‘Well if the idiot didn’t trap that animal in the first place then he might still be alive.’

‘*Dionisie*,’ Iris glared at him.

Mary-Margaret’s scarlet lips were quivering. She picked up her napkin, folding and unfolding it over and over.

‘How dare you! I don’t have to listen to this!’

‘I didn’t mean that,’ Dionisie paused, reining his anger back in. ‘I’m just saying it could have been avoided.’

She was still gripping the napkin but the folding had now turned into wringing.

‘Chimps are pretty cute when they’re babies, though,’ Iris smiled, in a hasty attempt to lighten the mood.

Dionisie kept quiet, irritated by his wife’s disregard. He couldn’t see chimpanzees as cute now. The only thing he could picture was an enraged animal in some huge mansion, mutilating an innocent woman. Just teeth, and blood, and fury. The black fur coat slumped over the sofa didn’t help much to ease his anger either.

Mary-Margaret chewed a slice of beef, smiling delicately through her mouthful.

‘They really are! See, we shouldn’t judge all those animals on one terrible incident.’

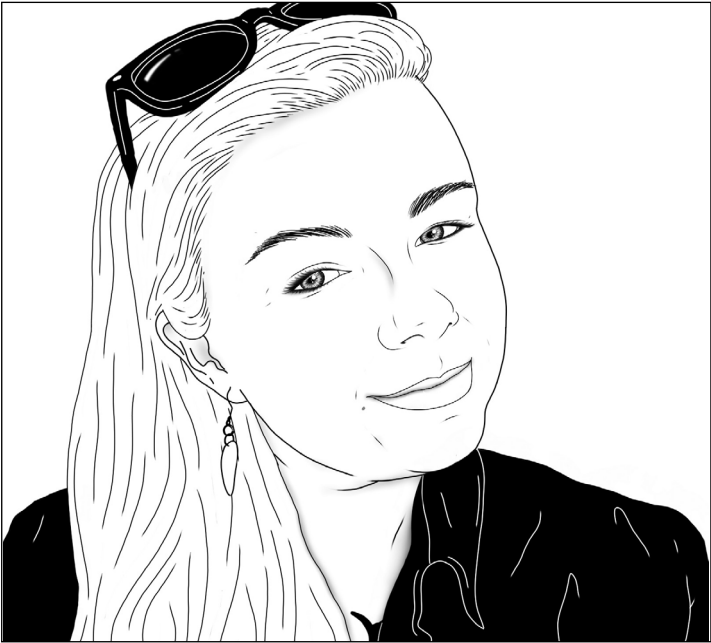
‘They’re the closest living relatives to humans,’ Iris said, pouring some more water into her mother’s empty glass.

‘See and people have done far worse, D-Dionassie,’ she said, picking up her glass without thanking Iris. ‘Have you ever seen those old chimpanzee tea parties? That shows you just how gentle they are.’

Dionisie nodded.

‘Yeah, they sit there all civilised and respectful drinking their tea, until one day, one of them *snaps*.’

E F McAdam



E F McAdam is a fantasy and sci-fi writer who loves all things mythology. Having started writing at thirteen years old, she's been telling tales for as long as she can remember. Her first ever story was about blackbirds, interests evolving from animals to fantastical creatures as the years went by. She completed a Creative Writing BA at Bath Spa University before applying for the MA at the University of Manchester. She's a barista by day and a dragon-slayer by night.

The Scots Valkyrie is the first novel in a series called *Anam Cara*. It is a modern interpretation of an alternate reality, where ancient, pagan religions are more dominant – and fight against – Christianity. This is an excerpt from the first few chapters, introducing the characters and the antagonists, the bear skinwalkers, which continue to stalk the protagonists throughout the novel series.

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The Scots Valkyrie

The psych ward was far too quiet.

Asta edged towards one of the doors. Through the window she saw a patient, a young man, who was strapped to his bed with a myriad of drips and monitors. Files were in little slots outside the door – Asta scanned them, one by one, as she strode down the corridor, until she found the right file.

‘Blair the ‘Screaming Banshee’,’ Asta read aloud with a scoff – typical of her friend to not give them her last name. If the Scots associated her with Bharghad, then maybe there would have been more chaos. And maybe chains. She flipped through the pages as she stepped into the room. The bed was empty. The cuffs were cut, the tear was ragged as though done by teeth. The evaluations inside Blair’s file were all done by mortals, which explained why the cuffs weren’t iron.

‘*Skide*, Blair,’ Asta sighed. ‘Why are you *here*?’

She glanced at her watch. Asta hadn’t come here with the aim to reconnect with the crazy sidhe she’d left, ten years ago, in New Craigs Psychiatric Hospital. She needed to get back to Colden, who, hours before, had called her with the news that his son had been attacked in their home. Iver would be out of surgery any minute. She’d promised Colden she’d be there.

But Blair was Asta’s responsibility – she had been for two thousand years. Colden would understand. The Holgarssons

knew as well as she did how dangerous the sidhe was when not properly medicated.

Throwing the file on the bed, she took off down the corridor until she came to the stairwell. Opening the door, Asta's ears rang with a humming she always associated with the sidhe. The little bastards were annoying enough protecting their mound, but it was another thing when added to the cacophony of hospital bleeps, whirs and coughs. Either way, it meant she was close. Asta stepped onto the landing. 'Blair?'

Her boot slipped and she glanced down to see a pool of blood by her feet. She moved to the top of the stairs and saw a body below her, in a porter's uniform. Rokkirhiminn hummed on her back and Asta's hand itched to take hold of her sword's hilt. Instead, she stomped down the stairs to crouch beside the body. She laid her palm on the man's back – he was still warm, not long dead. As she took a handful of his scrubs and rolled him over, his guts fell out over her boots.

Asta jerked back, looking at the ruined chest of the man, skin and cloth and blood merging together at the tears, the hole in his stomach spilling entrails onto the floor. Asta pressed her hand to her mouth, choking on the smell, and tried to steady herself. The only creature with claws long enough to leave such a mark was... Odin help me, Asta thought. The mad sidhe wasn't the only containment issue in the hospital.

Asta moved to the centre of the stairwell. Her hand itched again, so she stuffed it into her pocket. 'Blair?' Asta called. 'It's me, Asta.'

There was shuffling below, which stopped when she called. Asta could hear a panted breath, like a wild animal. She closed her eyes and prayed it was just her mad little sidhe, and she'd not just accidentally run into the monster who'd killed the porter.

‘Blair, it’s Asta. Come on. I’m here to take you home.’

There was a patter of feet, bare feet, on concrete and then, suddenly, Blair appeared at the bottom of the stairs. She paused, eyes wild and hair matted, before she raced up the steps, hospital robe flapping. Asta couldn’t help but smile – even though years had passed, Blair hadn’t changed. Sure, her red hair was slightly more untamed than last time, dreadlocks and beads and – was that a *feather*? – tangled in her endless curls, but she was still the same mad *sidhe* she’d always been.

‘It’s so nice to see –’

‘No time.’ Blair made a sharp right at the top of the stairs, hopped over the body of the man, and raced up to the second floor. ‘Can’t stop!’ she called back over her shoulder.

‘Blair?’ Asta watched as her friend disappeared from view before lurching after her. The slapping of the *sidhe*’s bare feet on stone rang up above her, always out of reach, red hair flashing around each corner. ‘Slow down! Wait!’

On the fifth floor, the door exiting the stairwell was swinging. Asta darted through to see Blair racing down the corridor. Her robe was only tied around her neck and her naked arse flashed like a moon as she ran, until she reached the end. She skidded to a halt, bare feet squeaking on the polished lino, before swerving to the right.

‘Blair!’ Asta called. She swore and lurched down the corridor after her, Doc Martens squeaking on the polished floor, Rokkirhiminn humming on her back. Her sword seemed ready to fight and she hoped – no she *prayed*, to Odin and Thor and all the other damned gods – that he was wrong.

He wasn’t. First, the air split with a deep, guttural roar. Second, Blair’s body came back into view – flying through the air. Red hair writhing like fire, she slammed back into the wall. Her head smacked back and she crumpled to the floor.

Asta's feet slammed to a stop. Rokkirhiminn was still humming, urging her on, pushing her to leap into battle. But the thought of raising her sword again reminded her, with a lightning flash of pain, of her last battle – of falling from the sky – of waking up with two burning scars on her back and her wings stuffed into pillowcases.

She was a Valkyrie. Or she used to be, at least. She would rather die, she thought, as she raced down the corridor towards the sound, than let her friend fight alone. Not that Blair could fight – her small body, dainty like a doll or bird, was lying still. Asta pressed her fingers to the soft skin of Blair's neck, shining ever so slightly with silky scales. A pulse. Faint as a butterfly's wings, but there.

Asta's breath escaped her in a rush, but before she could breathe freely, a growl behind her made her whirl. Squeezing between the tiny hospital doors was a huge brown bear.

The bear's hunched shoulders were wedged between the double doors, straining so hard that one shoulder was cut and bleeding. The other shoulder had a scar, the fur patchy and tattered around the old wound. Its lips curled back and it let out another roar that made the windows rattle.

A skinwalker? She'd never even seen one in Scotland – they were rare, even in Asta's home-country – never mind one attacking a village in Danelaw. *Her* village, *her* Holgarssons. Now, at least, she understood why Iver Holgarsson was in critical condition – the reason they were all here to begin with. Asta had never been mauled by bears before – she'd always been the one doing the damage – but the thought of claws slicing through a young boy was enough to make bile rise up to her throat. He was only thirteen.

She glanced down at Blair. She'd heal quickly enough, but not here – not in the sterile human world. She needed her people, sea or mound, or she'd be as dead as her father. But

she had to prioritise – the bear was heading towards a hospital room. Pushing doubts and other worries to the back of her mind, Asta leapt into battle.

The bear roared and swiped at the Valkyrie as she lunged, finally seeing her as a threat. Rokkirhiminn produced a high-pitched whine as he was released from the sheath, turning into a beautiful singing as he slashed through the air. The bear lifted a paw to block – the sword struck so heavily it stuck into the bone. The cry was louder, touched with pain, as its other paw batted Asta away.

The blow landed but the claws didn't connect – regardless, Asta was catapulted over the reception desk in the centre of the ward. A woman was cowering under the desk. She was shaking with fear – most Scots had never even *heard* of a skinwalker – but she wasn't pissing her pants, so Asta guessed a lot of magical-creature shit went down in this hospital anyway.

'Stay down,' Asta said, as if that wasn't obvious, groaning as she eased herself to her feet. 'I'm a professional.'

She wished for her armour, not for the first time, instead of her Masters of Reality t-shirt. Not that Black Sabbath didn't give her the courage of ten men. Rising above the desk, she winced as she assessed how many ribs were broken. Limping badly, Rokkirhiminn still lodged in his front-right leg, the bear trailed blood and fur as it inched across the floor.

Asta tried to haul herself over the desk but then decided to shuffle around instead. The bear wasn't watching her. It wasn't even watching Blair. Its eyes were on a window, looking into a private room, where the blinds were drawn. Next to the window was a glass-panelled door, and through this, Asta saw movement.

She circled, trying to keep the bear's sharp teeth and skull-crushing jaw in her view, realising there was a chair and some

other equipment hastily thrown against the door, trying to barricade it. She caught a flash of dark hair in the window-pane of the door. The man behind the door stopped and moved back into view. Asta locked eyes with Colden Holgarsson and for a moment they stared at one another. As though both were surprised to see each other there, though they'd been having coffee together earlier, when Asta consoled him over the dreadful attack on his son. As though there wasn't a bear stalking towards their room. As if the bear wasn't back to finish the job.

'Colden, get back!'

The bear gave a roar and launched itself through the window. The glass shattered, the blinds tangling around the furred body as the bear squeezed its front legs through the gap and started swiping.

Asta raced forward and threw herself onto the bear's back, clinging onto the fur as thick and wiry as a man's beard. Through the window-frame, most of which was taken up by the huge bear, Asta could see Colden lunging at the beast. He was wielding a drip stand that wasn't even sharp, and with his other hand, he was pushing a bed out of the bear's reach.

On the bed was a small boy, too small against the pale sheets, with the familiar dark hair of the Holgarssons. Iver.

'My sword!' Asta yelled, as the space in the small room grew smaller – bear, Colden and the bed all pressing back towards the far wall. She jammed her hand into the wound on the bear's shoulder and it roared. 'Get my sword!'

Colden lunged – the bear swiped with its free paw. Asta wrapped an arm around the bear's neck – it was like hugging an oak, there was no way she'd be able to circle it in her arms – and hooked its leg with her other. She squeezed, making her long-forgotten muscles work, and snapped the bear's joint.

Its cry was loud enough to summon Ragnarok.

Colden lunged again, gripped the handle of Rokkirhiminn and *screamed*. Her sword hummed violently, the hilt glowing red hot as Colden recoiled. He stumbled back against the wall and fell. His hand, cradled against his chest, was blistering red.

'Colden!' Even with Rokkirhiminn sticking from its paw, the other now hanging loosely, the bear was determined to grab Iver's bed. Its claws hooked onto the edge and drew him closer. *'Iver!'*

Not now, Asta thought. Not like this. Her oath to the Holgarssons was going to be broken, like this, with a child and a bear in a hospital. With no sword and a hangover. Asta tried to squeeze through the gap but the bear's shoulders kept moving, pressing her up into the window-frame and shredding her back with glass. Her ribs groaned like a longship on rough waves as she was crushed and torn and crushed again.

'Colden! I need my sword!'

Iver, unconscious through the chaos, finally opened his eyes. He watched with utter serenity as his bed was being dragged towards the bear's mouth, teeth as large as thumbs and saliva pooling onto the floor below. And, through the screaming and pain and the smell of Colden's burning flesh, Asta noticed that Iver's eyes – once the typical Holgarsson blue – were completely black.

There was a whirl of movement and a flash of red like a fire rushing through dry heather. Blair dove through the tiniest gap between the bear and window-frame, as supple as a snake, and seized Rokkirhiminn from the bear's arm.

She heaved and the sword slid free. The bear howled and his paw slipped down, dragging the bed over sideways. Colden lunged, catching Iver before his head hit the floor – and the boy's eyes closed as if he'd been unconscious the whole time.

Blair looked up at Asta – whose body now felt completely

flattened in the middle, like a cartoon who'd been run over – and tossed the sword skywards. Asta reached forward, worried how her hand was shaking, and felt the song of the kill echoing through Rokkirhiminn's hilt as she snatched it out of the air.

The rest wasn't really up to her. Rokkirhiminn knew what to do and sunk down hilt-deep into the bear's thick neck.

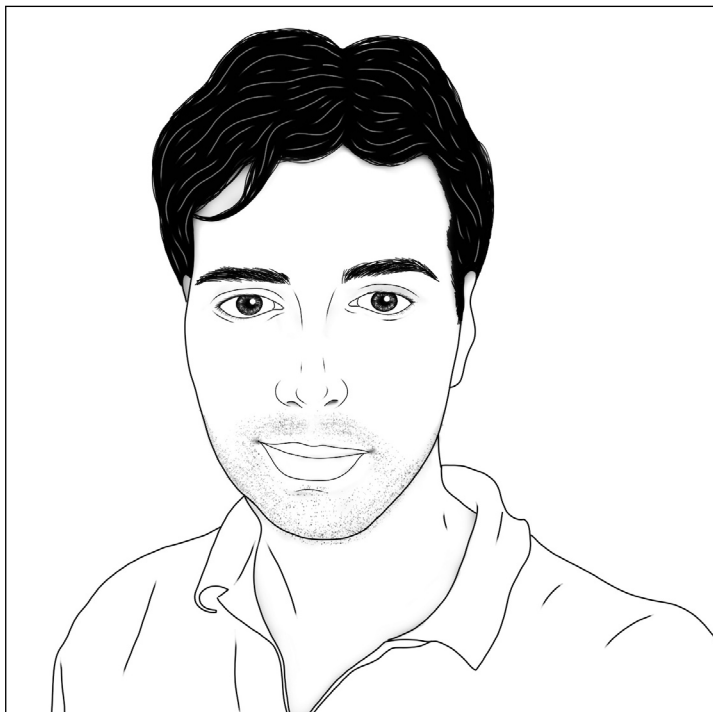
Its roar eased, lowering in pitch into a gentle growl that reverberated up through Asta's chest. It stilled – and then sagged. Its chest deflated and the pain in Asta's back eased. She tumbled down off its shoulders and onto the floor, just in time to see the massive bear's head slide away and lie inert – the skin of a bear, lying dead and glass-eyed. The pelt was skinned in a rush, she saw, the fur matted from age and the scar on the shoulder hadn't been treated. The bear had been *old* when killed, a stark contrast to the boy lying beneath – he had pale skin and brown hair and a nose he hadn't grown into yet. He looked maybe seventeen.

Lying on her side, Rokkirhiminn pulsed in her hand, now as cool to the touch as he'd always been. She looked between his sharp, blood-soaked edge, and the man – though really, Asta thought, he was just a *boy* – and felt a sharp hurt, almost like betrayal, at her own blade. It was supposed to never hurt the innocent. The bear was a threat, as a skinwalker, but the boy beneath *was not*.

'What have we done?' Asta whispered, to her blade, who hummed a little louder, blocking Colden's voice as he bent over his son, whispering soothing words. She rolled over, her chest heaving and pain spreading wet like blood across her back. They were safe. She'd saved them. That was all that mattered. Right?

Blair appeared over her, hair wild and stained even redder with blood, smiling down at her. 'See, I couldn't stop.'

Luca Zedda



Is this thing on? Is it working?

Yeah? So I just... I just speak to the... okay.

Hi.

Luca Zedda hails from the desolate wastelands of eastern Europe, also known as Poland. A writer of genre fiction, he was tainted with the corrupting touch of sci-fi and fantasy at the tender age of... well, quite early on, I don't remember the exact details to be honest. To make things worse, he lately developed an appreciation for horror, which might become somewhat evident after the next few pages.

He writes mainly short stories, most of them indeed horror and fantasy, but also comedies and examples of magical realism. He often explores themes of subjectivity, morality and religion. He's also apparently guilty of indulging in overly-opinionated narrators – not that I would know anything about that, of course.

Sooo, yeah, that's it. I think. Yeah?

Good.

Woah. Now that was just horrible.

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The Last Days of Narash

I was on the way back to Narash when he arrived. We were returning from the fields, my sister Mereth and I. In the bags on our backs we had the yields, the wheat, the rye, the barley, for it was summer and the time of harvest. Beneath mine I had a fresh head of lettuce hidden, one that Mereth stole from old Kin-arat – for we knew he was wealthy and alone, and would not miss it. By the entrance to the village we stopped, at the altar of our forefathers. We recited their names and we placed the first ears of grain at its feet. I elbowed Mereth as she giggled, distracted, for Therash, the young son of the huntsman sat nearby and whistled a tune. I would have to speak with his father, I thought, for with our parents gone it was my duty to be my sister's matchmaker.

It was by the smell that we first knew of the man's arrival. He stank of a long road, of dirt, of dung and urine. Beneath the ripped rags that covered his form, his body seemed broken, shrivelled, wrong. As if shattered bones protruded from his back, as if something slithered across his flesh beneath the cover of his worn-out cloth. And his face, his face. Deep scars disfigured his cheeks, five on each side, stretching beneath the black, empty, clawed out eye-sockets. And as he opened his lips, raising his voice to the skies in song, hoarse words in a tongue we had not known, the scars too seemed to shift, to crawl in rupture along his face.

At the sight of him all on the road stopped. Hir-tash, who, bent over by the weight of her age, was sweeping the entrance to her house, quickly spat in her hand and threw it over her head, murmuring a quick prayer under her breath as she gave him the evil-eye. And since she was old and wise in the ways of the unseen, we all repeated her motion. Uncaring, he moved on towards the line of our huts, carrying with him the unknowable song. Mereth was the first one to break out of our stupor; she looked at me and whispered, as if scared the man would hear her, that we would need to go and warn the elder – it was his right and duty to judge and decide on the law of hospitality. She turned and was ready to run before I caught her hand. I called out to Therash and gave him my bag, telling him to lead Mereth back to our house. As she looked at me, I said I would do so, I would go and warn the elder, and she would wait safely until the man was gone. For though I knew not the outsider's stench, I knew that it did not belong to this world.

I was not the first to reach the elder. As I approached his hut in the centre of the village he was already leaving it, surrounded by people. There was the baker and his wife, who provided for us when our parents had passed, and there was the young fisher who brought me fresh trout in courtship, with his brother and sister. There was old Kin-arat, with the trader from the town, and Ni-mar with her husband, who walked slowly behind the rest. As they walked, she was delicately caressing her belly, for the state of her blessing was near completion. And there was Therash's older brother and father, both hunters who knew the woods, wielding spears in their hands. They marched at the front, beside the hulking form of our elder, who held the staff passed on from elder to elder since the times unremembered. Though he had seen more winters than anyone in our village, he still rose a head

over the huntsman and his son. And so I joined them, and we went back to where I saw the strange man.

More people joined us as we walked back to the edge of our village. They left their huts on seeing our moving crowd, filled with excitement – Narash was off the usual trails, far away from even the closest town. It was rare for us to see guests, for us to see anything from beyond the trees. Only old Kin-arat dealt with the strangers from beyond our valley, like the weirdly dressed merchant who had visited him to complete a trade. Only old Kin-arat and the youngsters who begged to work for him; for the wild call of adventure rustled the spirit of so many of our boys. So once we reached the last of the huts and the altar to the ancestors, our numbers had grown to encompass almost all of Narash, except for the children who were left inside and forbidden from leaving – for even in the eagerness to see what caused such a commotion, the parents could smell the uneasy stench in the air.

The stranger stood there, a distance before us, motionless, waiting. He had stopped his song since I left looking for the elder, though I did not notice its absence. Yet now, with it gone, the silence that enveloped us felt too empty – even though there were whispers among us, people wondering aloud as if ignoring that he could hear us – for maybe he could not, maybe he didn't even know our tongue? And though he was hunched and cadaverous, I felt glad the hunters were with us, with their spears.

And when he spoke, raising his shaking, skeletal hands to his face, his voice was quiet, distant and crackled, yet each word I heard as if it were whispered into my ears.

'I bring you joy, I bring you salvation.' Pus spilled beneath his fingers as he dug into the scars that covered his cheeks. Something crawled beneath his cloth, as if slithering worms

wriggled their way across his body, their frantic squirming disturbing the rags covering his form. 'Rejoice, for He is coming. Rejoice, for He will be here, and He will always be, and He will always have been. In His Name, this servant asks you for hospitality.'

'Begone,' the elder spoke, hitting the ground with the staff in his hand. 'You are not welcome here.'

'The Son of the Moon, Father to the Stars,' the man continued, convulsing under the cover of his tattered robe as he clawed against his own face with ecstasy in his voice. 'Lord of the Grey Valley Beyond! Khalad-Ur, He comes! Tremble and rejoice! Tremble if you wrong Him, cower if you denounce Him! Rejoice, for you can serve Him through His servant. In His Name, I demand hospitality.'

'You are not welcome here.' The elder repeated 'You are no guest of ours, begone!'

'Begone.' Voices from our crowd echoed his words. 'Begone!'

'You are no guest!'

'Begone!'

'He comes to deliver us from the nightmares of this world.' His voice rose as he rapidly bent backwards towards the ground, the creaking sound of his moving bones reaching us as the euphoria in his tone reached zenith. 'Denounce your ways, anoint yourself in His name and be delivered to his side! Accept Him through His servant, give Him hospitality!'

'Thrice; begone, creature!' the elder yelled once more. 'You will not find hospitality in our homes. Leave now, begone!'

And by his side, having moved from the front of her house, old Hir-tash, wise in the ways of the unseen, burned in her hands a figure of tied herbs as is the way. 'Begone, nameless thing, you are not welcome here.'

And the men and the woman joined her chant, and they

yelled against him. And I saw Mereth who, having disobeyed my words, slunk out of the hut and joined the crowd, as she too stood by the elder and cried:

‘Begone!’

And the hunters stepped forwards with their spears and, though the man was small and frail, they seemed to tremble as they did. And he bent back towards us, and hissed, and turned away, breaking again into his alien song. As he started walking a young boy, whom I often saw looking with hunger at Mereth, picked up a stone and threw it at the figure, hitting him loudly in the back of his skull. Yet the man did not fall, nor did he stop, but went on as more and more men mimicked the youth, picking up stones and throwing them at the stranger.

‘Begone!’ they screamed. ‘Begone!’

And they continued until he was gone, until the dark line of trees swallowed him. And then we waited some more, as the eldest huntsman, who knew the forest best, gathered four men to go and see if the stranger had truly left. And as they did, and as others prepared to stand watch, we went back to our homes. There I scolded Mereth, for she disobeyed my words that should be as the words of our parents. Yet in truth I did understand her curiosity. I reached for the bags in which we brought the grain and I emptied them, for the time of supper was approaching. At the bottom of the bag, I found the lettuce to be rotten and filled with maggots.

Yet the days that followed were calm, quiet. The man did not appear again. The hunters returned on the following evening, bringing us news that he was truly gone. We all went back to our normal lives. Mereth and I still spent the days in the fields, for the harvest was our duty. We worked, and we laughed, and we prayed by the altar to our ancestors, thanking them for the yields, for the village, for the man being

gone. We returned home in the evenings, we ate, and we slept. On the third day I helped Hir-tash with the roof of her hut, as it was leaking, and the summer brought rain. She had always liked me. She sought to teach me the unseen arts, the ways of our ancestors, but I was still too young for that. And so she prepared me, scaring away all possible suitors. For no man can touch what belongs to the spirits, she would say. The days were passing, one after another, as they always do. And only old Kin-arat grew restless, he and the merchant who stayed in his house. For the youngsters were to return with their cart, having sold what they could in the town, to take the amusing man back on their next trip. Yet though their time of return had passed, there were no signs of them. But we paid it no mind. They were young, it was a town. They must have gotten drunk, forgot. They would be back, and old Kin-arat would give them a scolding. We laughed, and we almost forgot the weird outsider's visit. And so, seven days had passed.

On the night after the seventh day, I awoke to the sound of a song. The crackled voice carried over the skies, its words unknowable. I was in Hir-tash's hut, for she'd invited me for supper as thanks for all my help. As we ate, she burned herbs in the hearth, for my body and spirit to know their smoke, to prepare me for the duty I would one day inherit. The flames whispered to me, their soft voices slipping into my ears, carrying me over to the valley of our ancestors. At first, as I awoke, I thought it was still them. But then I recognised the voice. And so did Hir-tash, who watched over my dream, my journey.

I rushed out of the hut to see the road filled with the others, looking nervously around them as they left their own homes. The baker, holding his wife in his arms, yelled out and pointed to the woods behind the fields, where a blue light

flickered between the trees. No sooner did we look than it disappeared. And one of the hunters called out, pointing to the stones at the edge of a valley, for there the blue light flickered again. And once more, no sooner did we look than it disappeared. And another of us pointed back to the trees, and another to the hermit's hut in the distance, and another, and another, and another. The lights flickered and danced, and burst, and disappeared. The song filled the air as they did, unspeakable words reverberating within our ears, notes burning into our minds. Mereth ran at me, for I had left her alone in our hut that eve, and now she was scared, and she looked for me. And we hugged as the lights surrounded the valley, as the song filled the roads of Narash. And they grew brighter, and it grew louder, swallowing all that was, brilliant, radiating, yearning, until all that was, was the light, the light and the howling notes of the song. And then, just as suddenly as they appeared, they were gone. And in my arms Mereth cried, in the darkness, in the silence of the night.

As the sun rose in the east, we heard a scream from the outskirts of the village. And I knew I had to go. I had to see. For the smoke of the herbs Hir-tash burned the night before was still alive in my blood, and I could hear it telling me that it was the way. In front of one of the furthest huts, a woman knelt in tears over a body, headless remains lying in a scarlet pool. And while the head was nowhere to be found, I needed no face to know whom it was. The boy. The one who threw the first stone. And though he could not have died but an hour before, his hand was rotten and wriggling with maggots.

We gathered by the elder's hut. What shall we do, we panicked. What can we do? What must we do? The boy's father was first to speak, his face red from tears and anger. He would gather the men and go hunt the monster who did it. He would have revenge for his son. The hunters advised

against it, they spoke of the light, of the song. Of how we knew nothing. Yet the man could not be convinced. He gathered five who would follow, and they took up their spears and bows. And left. As they walked towards the treeline, I knew that they would not return. Then, the elder finally spoke.

‘We will fortify our homes,’ he said. ‘We will survive.’

The men and the boys were sent to cut down more trees, so we could finish the palisade we had begun so many years before, back when the threat of a feud with those of the forest was still burning. We would gather in the innermost huts, sharing them between families. We would set up fires and watches. We would arm ourselves and be prepared, while Hir-tash would pray to the ancestors, asking them to give us guidance and strength. To protect us from what crept beyond the valley. And as he said, so we did.

On the second night, only our fires lit the village. For as we looked to the sky, whispering prayers to whichever spirits would listen, we saw that it was empty. No star lit the night, no star looked down upon us from the heavens. Not even the ever-watchful eye of the moon adorned the endless black expanse. Yet no song nor music filled the air, no lights danced in the shadows beyond the corners of our eyes. And as the sun rose on the next day, we were all still together.

We gathered what we could from the fields, for it was still the time of harvest and we could not let it go to waste, or we would starve in the winter. We looked up nervously as we did, towards the trees, towards the skies. There were men with us, armed, ready to protect us should the need arise. But it was a calm day. A quiet day.

They came on the third night. Their white forms crashed through the palisade, bones breaking and reforming with sickening cracks. Each of them as long as a thousand snakes

and with as many maws. Uncountable limbs sprawled from the mountains of their flesh, carrying them as they crawled through the roads. Their claws and teeth tore through the men, who screamed as they naively tried to fight them off with their spears. And in their ever-shifting flesh, as if growing beneath their mucus-covered skin, the faces of those who had left were wailing. I saw it as I sat by the fire, desperately mouthing the words as is the way, as was my duty, for I was helping Hir-tash in her prayers. One charged at us, the deformed mass of its worm-like flesh glistening in the light of the fire. I threw myself away from Hir-tash and ran into the hut, where I clung to my crying sister, and I heard the old, wise woman's cries as it dug its teeth into her flesh. And I heard the men. The baker, who was soon to be a father, the fisher, who would bring me trout in courtship, and the hunters, and the elder, and Kin-arat, and... And I heard them all. And I cowered by the wall, holding my sister close, and I heard them slither on the road, and I heard the breaking and mending of their bones, the shifting of their meat, the clicking of their voices, as they rose in song to the star-less sky. I could not move, I could not even pray. While the fires died out outside, crushed beneath their monstrous forms, as the husbands and the fathers of Narash were being slaughtered, Mereth and I just cried.

As the day broke, they were gone. They did not touch our hut, nor did they touch any of the others. Only those outside, only those beneath the open sky. Those who defended us. Those who fought. The men, with their spears. Hir-tash, with her ways. They took most of the bodies, leaving behind but scraps of flesh and bone, drowned in the rivers of red that the roads of Narash became. We gathered what we could, we the women and the children, all that remained of the people of Narash. We burned it, so that the spirits might join our

ancestors in the land beyond. We all wept as we did, trying not to see what we found, trying not to recognise the scar on the hand, the deformed little toe on the left foot, the blemish on the shoulder. The untouched face on Hir-tash's ripped off head, her empty eyes staring off into the sky. We burned them all, gathered in a circle around the fire, whispering their names.

It was Mereth who suggested it. She looked at me, as if searching for strength to borrow from her sister, yet I had none to give. And so, she just said it. It was our punishment. We all knew so, yet we thought we could escape it. We could not. They would come again, under the starless night, and kill us all. Maybe at first they would avoid the huts, but not for long. For we heard them feasting, and we knew that they hungered. We could not stop them. We would be punished, for we had wronged Him. There was but one thing that we could still do. That we could still try. Beg. Beg for forgiveness.

And so, as the sun went down and the fire went out, we went to the edge of the village, where we had all those days before wronged Him. We tore down the altar to the ancestors and we trampled the offerings beneath it. And we prayed, we prayed with the words that we had not known before – yet then, it was as if we had always known them.

'Son of the Moon! Father to the Stars! Immortal Keeper of the Endless Fields!'

'Guide of Souls! Lord of the Grey Valley Beyond! Khalad-Ur, Divine King!'

'Forgive us, for we have sinned! Forgive us, for we have wronged Thee!'

'Forgive us, as we denounce our ways, as we denounce our fathers' and their fathers', and their fathers' fathers' spirits!'

'Forgive us, as we anoint ourselves in Thy Name, as we beg Thee!'

‘Deliver us to Thy side, deliver us from the nightmares of this world!’

And we prayed, hand in hand, sons and daughters, sisters and mothers, fatherless, brotherless, sonless. And as we prayed, we cried. We prayed as the sun disappeared beyond the treeline. We prayed as the skies above shone, littered in thousands of thousands of bright stars. We prayed as the moon looked down upon us, opening its maw in a wide smile. We prayed as they slithered from beyond the trees, the faces of the dead adorning their skin, joining us in our laudation.

We prayed, as the stars started to sing.

C K Wetton



Charlotte Wetton is based in West Yorkshire. Her first pamphlet, *I Refuse to Turn into a Hat Stand*, won the Michael Marks Awards 2017. She has been published in *Poetry Wales*, *Staple*, *Stand* and *The Frogmore Papers*, and won a New Writing North award in 2019. She has performed at Aldburgh, Ledbury and the StAnza Slam and has a spoken word album, *Body Politic*.

The selection of poems here all use a particular sort of language to play – the language of Ordnance Survey maps, or management speak, or the common names of insects. I want the reader to enjoy the inherent rhythms and rhymes of these (almost) found languages. My ideal is that the reader would feel linguistically recharged by these poems and want to savour language, even in everyday life.

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Song of the bug

Segmented tankman
with glass-noodle legs,
we never stop questioning

*O monk's louse, monkey-peas
peasie-bug, doodlebug*

medieval perambulator
buffed to a dull sheen
both horse and knight

*O butchy boy, boat-builder
monk's louse, monkey-peas*

tiny-footed scuttle
to the dark mulch
underbelly of anything

*we're grammersow, granny grey
peasie-bug, doodlebug*

when will we stop asking questions
with our twin antennae
half folded like a music-stand

*sing peasie-bug, doodlebug
cheesy bob, chiggy pig*

corner like a bendy bus
articulated wagonette
the size of a vitamin

grammersow granny grey
cheesy bob, chiggy-pig

busy in the garden every weekend
in our autumn gabardine
on our Scottish-reel legs

sing monk's louse, monkey-peas
cheesy bob, chiggy-pig
peasie-bug, doodlebug
pill millipedes armadillidiidae.

Project management is a mental illness

a weird kind of syndrome that blacks out the present,
the present is annoying! The future is the thing!
We tend to speak in jargon and to type very fast,
we swig from water bottles and we pop Pro-plus

we sit scrunched up at the ergonomic desks,
don't take vacations 'cause we just get behind.
Living in the future keeps you earning more and more,
we are the managers who think we've got it all.

Time is too many too small boxes.
Time is a terrorist who ambushes projects.
Time is white water rapids that will not stop.
We're living in the future and we can't come back.

We estimate capacity, allocate resource
what the point of it is – we don't really ask,
our love is for spreadsheets and a smooth transition
we are the managers who get things done.

We go fast and faster but it's never fast enough,
quarterly reports make us feel bish-bosh.
Nights, we hit the gym – burn off excess stress
– getting lean with these projects fuelling us.

Time is a tapeworm, knocking at the gut.
Time is a cake cut in ever smaller bits.
Time is a suitcase you can't quite shut.
We're living in the future and we can't come back.

Us managers are sick, our eyes are dull and glazed,
we don't hear birdsong, we don't feel the rain
we're sitting in meetings but we're not really here
in March we live in May, and in May we live in June;

but visit Quarter Four and you'll see that all is well
with our Gantts realigned and the sponsors all informed.
Temporal disorders are often diagnosed,
prescribing a pay-cut doesn't go down well.

Time is the enemy. Time must be fought.
Time is feral and bites you on the arse.
Time is a horse that runs itself to death.
Time is a bug I think I've caught,
I'm living in the future and I can't come back.

Haikus

I kill the engine,
the moor's dry grasses lit pink,
cut-out crow exits.

*

My lone red tulip
lolls over, loosens into
an open-mouthed kiss.

*

The earth seethes with ants,
a broken nest erupts in
urgent, angry work.

*

I tell my children
the slumped badger by the road
is only sleeping.

*

I lay sugar trails,
form a mandala of ants,
fetch boiling water.

*

Little white feathers
from the hen-harrier's kill
float in the sunshine.

*

Sweating onions,
easing pop of the corkscrew,
us not arguing.

*

Map OL21

Slaughter Gap, Cat Stones,
Horrodiddle, Paradise,
Canker Lane, Jam Hill.

Great Ding, Jubilee,
Dungeon Wood, Fill Belly Flat,
Wolf Stones, Clunters, Tongue.

Commissioning a map

The cartographer and I have had a tiff,
I don't appreciate his profession,
my slapdash approach to boundaries is troubling,
the distance the crow flies is not the same as walking.
But that's just fine because I
am more interested in flying than walking.
He explains my map is not to scale,
that I've mixed Northings with Eastings,
that A and B roads aren't choices made or unmade.
A variable of five degrees can be the difference
between success or failure.
But my concerns are not to scale and furthermore
I want the bridleways unbridled,
the best bacon sandwiches mapped,
where to go sledging and
what time not to walk alone at night.
Maps, he explains, don't do temporal,
and I say, well, the hydrographer did the whales,
spouting beautifully in the ornamental lake.
He points out the hydrographer got lost
trying to draw an armada at the swimming pool
and asks me not to hop-scotch on his grid lines.
He thinks I'm a slagheap (dis).
But he has plotted the silence of the moors
(marsh, reeds or saltings)
and the gorgeous swoop of the motorway.
My contour lines are scum rings round the bath.
The cartographer is sick of drawing dragons and
if I have that many dragons there'll be no cattle left in
Calderdale.

BS! I say, I'm the one making this map,
you're just my technical advisor.
You need more than technical, he says, more than advice.
It's true that there's a bubble in my compass.

RDM Whittaker



Ryan emerged from the dark Satanic mills of Bolton at some point in the 1980s and now aims to add a dark and unpredictable working-class voice to genre fiction. He bleeds fantasy, science fiction and horror. Complex, morally ambiguous characters and an intense gothic aesthetic set his writing apart, delivering provocative themes while refusing to sacrifice character or plot. He has been accused of writing great villains. He currently writes

professionally for *globaldata.com* and *verdict.co.uk*, and his words have been quoted by the *Guardian*. He dwells in Hyde with one wife and five cats.

The opening to the dark fantasy piece *Western Dawn* introduces us to a nameless protagonist, you, mid-torture. The opening sets the gritty, ironic tone: The Apex, a revolutionary messiah, seems to have all the power in the world, yet you, a captured terrorist, have the upper hand. How? Why are your allies attacking the city? Just who are you and will you hold out? The questions hang while hints of the wider narrative bubble to the surface. There is something powerful present, something just beyond the text. Magic, philosophy and deeply human hatreds weave together in this genre-bending fantasy horror-thriller.

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Western Dawn

1

'The Inquisition send you?' he asks, scraping the red poker out of a black brazier.

You say nothing.

The end of a scrawny roll-up glows under his hood. The smoke he exhales, thick and blue, smells sweet. It is a reprieve from the acrid stink of metal and body odour. He releases the poker and it remains aloft, suspended by invisible force. The glowing tip of the poker weaves lazily in the air.

'Keep watching the poker,' he says, tracing a line in the air that the poker mimics. 'Consider how I'm going to use it. Consider that secrets will not keep you alive. Here, secrets will condemn you to pain and then to a preventable, and severely unpleasant, death.'

You ignore the poker.

You look at the metal hanging on the north wall. Gleaming tools, weapons and armour dangle by the reinforced wooden door. They *tap-tap-tap* on the wall, snagged in the currents that swim around your captor, the so-called Apex. In your hands, any one of those weapons could mulch his face, turn his brain to pulp.

The fire in the brazier pops and crackles. You wince, unable to grip the arms of the chair.

‘Again! What is your name? Who is with you? Where is your next target?’

The window is a small rectangle near the ceiling, some metal bars, no glass. Dust, lit by the flames outside, rolls through the aperture. Soldiers’ boots stamp on street cobbles. The city will be ash before morning, it just doesn’t know it yet.

He paces in front of the big furnace on the eastern wall, patting a rag at his face. He looks like a corpse, drained of blood. His waxen skin, the colour of moonlight, writhes with black veins that spread from his eyes. His eyes are black and wet, utterly inhuman.

He shuffles beyond your vision, clutching at his ribs. You’d track him, but the clamp around your neck keeps you looking forwards. Swollen flesh compresses your right eye shut. The stumps of your wrists throb. You feel pins under fingernails that are no longer there.

You glance at the black knuckles crackling in the brazier.

A clever move, that. Can’t cast nothing if you got no hands.

‘How many are in your conspiracy?’ he asks. He sways gently. ‘What is your name?’

White light slashes the gloom, slanting from window to wall. Thunder rattles your metal chair, drills the cold stones under your feet.

He staggers to the little window by the ceiling and peers out. ‘Stormcasting?’ Little fragments of hail rattle through the hole. He paces between the window and furnace, alarm twitching across his features. His mouth is moving, inaudible, swallowed by the elemental assault outside.

He is counting to himself, trying to work things out. He hasn’t realised yet.

Good.

You tinkle your chains to attract his attention. Perhaps you will finally talk? Perhaps fear has broken you. He has nothing to lose by talking to you, nothing but time.

The belts of his coat clink as he leans against a workbench. He cranks the handle on a creaking pulley.

Eek. Eek. Eek.

The chains about your limbs and neck clank as they tighten. The glowing tip of the poker continues to weave in the air, like a firefly on a lonely summer evening. The metal is cold, despite the heat from the row of furnaces. Some fine workman filed the edges smooth.

Got to appreciate the little things.

‘How many are in your conspiracy?’

A wave of his fingers and the metal collar leaps into the recesses of the smithy. It lands with a dull clang.

Cool breeze hits your neck. It’s as if you’ve never felt air. Rivulets of sweat roll from your hair to the linen on your back. Your head lolls to one side and you try to blink away the —

Skin squeals, rupturing into steam. The glowing tip fills your eye socket, hovering on the edge of your eyelid. You’d scream, but your shredded throat can only rasp. Don’t move, just don’t move. He needs information, not a corpse.

The poker dives into a trough of shrieking water. Vapour mushrooms upwards and when it clears you spy flecks of skin swirling in dark liquid.

You try to blink away the pulsing purple smear burned on your vision. Your eye is dry and your eyelid is raw and splitting.

‘Who are you?’ he asks. Despite his steady voice, sweat rolls down his features.

Pain floods in from your cheek. The shocked numbness is being washed away by a raging glow. He’s burnt you. Again.

And your face won't ever be the same; it has a new range of rosy flesh mountains. Your crotch is saturated with urine. You're a disfigured cripple, now. Your skin throbs, each pulse a fresh scourge. You feel hands that aren't there being burnt again.

No. Your skin is made of lies. You are as immune to pain as the dead. All of this hurts no more than a blacksmith branding leather. Your pain can be folded up, placed under cold earth. You are Death. You have killed him, he just doesn't know it yet.

He lifts something. You struggle to focus.

'A glass dagger,' he says, balancing your broken weapon, turning it over in his hands. His voice is even but his fingers tremble.

You nod.

'Very clever to use glass.'

Sticking him with it was exquisite, a real treat for the senses. His face collapsed from smug to confused, to disbelief. You plunged until the edge squeaked on bone and the blade cracked. Before he reacted, you twisted it, splaying the shards like petals inside him. You hope it hurt.

That's when he grabbed you, crushed your neck. You survived.

'Difficult material to turn into a weapon, glass,' he says. 'Fragile, difficult to work. Nobody uses it anymore, of course. I suppose that's why it worked. All you needed to do, you imagined, was to use it once; to poison me. And the Inquisition knew you couldn't use metal.' He looks upwards and you follow his gaze to the metal objects circling on the ceiling. Hammers, tongs and rasps drift like leaves in a whirlpool. 'Makes sense that the Inquisition would attempt a countermeasure. They already sent armies, I turned them to piles of slag. Did you hear about that?'

You smile your wet, gummy smile back at him.

‘Yes, well,’ he says, his voice momentarily unnerved. ‘You alone have landed a blow on me. Impressive, certainly, but ultimately you have only doomed yourself.’

The metal objects rain down, pinging and clanging around you. You squeeze your eyes closed.

When they open, you see the glass dagger sticking out of your shoulder, the handle moving with your shallow breaths. He crunches the glass in your wound and drags the weapon out wetly. He places the cracked blade onto the workbench where it leaks viscous black liquid onto your lone silver coin.

There is no pain in your shoulder, just numbness.

He uncorks a heavy flask on his belt. It sounds half-empty. He takes a deep swig and tosses some at your face. The distilled alcohol burns the exposed flesh from cheekbone to ear. He knocks the last of the liquid back, swallows and gasps. His fingers don’t tremble anymore. ‘Glad to see that your ... spirits are up,’ he says.

Torture is one thing, but wordplay is evil.

He slaps his hands together and the blacksmith’s grotto blooms an unstable, sickly white-green. The light swells and recedes from the unholy tattoos on his arms. ‘I think we know each other well enough. I needn’t hide the fact I can heal anymore, eh? There’s nobody watching us. I could heal your wounds, would you like that?’

You turn from his blasphemous display. You shake your heavy, dripping head.

‘You’re a fanatic,’ he says, jabbing each word into your skull. ‘I’m the Apex. A fanatic can’t kill the Apex because he disapproves of what the Apex has to say. You can’t just murder your way through a city to get to me. I’m beyond that. I’m an idea, a movement. I’m making a stand here, the people, they...’

You don't care. These are the squealings of a boar with a broken dick, nothing more. The shoulder wound feels... cool. Two images of him circle in front of you, patting at their chests, making grandiose gestures.

'...for all those people out there. That's why the Inquisition sent you to stop me. They're desperate. The Inquisition knows I'm too powerful, and there's nothing they can do to stop me. The world will be better after, when the Inquisition is gone, surely you must see that? When the people, people like you, real people, are free from-'

You spit blood, hoping it will land on his face. It just dribbles uselessly down your chin.

'No interest in politics, eh? No matter. If you want to avoid liberation, that's your business. Live how you like. This is my offer, I will only make it once - I want your name, the names of your co-conspirators. I must stop this senseless murder.'

All you need do is wait him out.

'You need not suffer. You will be released after the Inquisition has been destroyed, free to live the life of an anonymous cripple. As long as you do not threaten my subjects. Refuse and the torture will continue. I am merciful, but I am not without limits.'

True. This thing has its limits, despite what his cult says. His ability to talk about himself, however, that may be limitless.

'The revolution is underway, assassin, and I will see it to its completion. Humanity's course will be corrected. Someone, somewhere, will know who you are, who your family are. You cannot protect them unless you help me, now.'

You gurgle and wheeze. He squints at your neck.

'Is your voice damaged? Did I damage it?'

You nod. He lifts your coin and releases it. It falls, bounces and circles to a stop on the workbench.

‘The penny drops!’ he says.

He grips your neck and holds his other hand up, contorting his fingers so the tattoos form a specific symbol – decay – but inverted. The intricate lines of the symbol glow pus-green, the sickly light arcing and dancing between the geometric shapes across his flesh. The glow flows out of him and pushes inside you, spreading through your veins and tissues. Warm tendrils filling the gaps inside you, spreading and uncoiling. The tears inside knit and twist themselves into their correct alignments; ligaments twang, and bones grind and reset.

Your skin covers the wound in your shoulder but the inside remains cold and numb. His tattoos sputter green sparks and he releases his grip.

Your hands remain charring in the brazier.

Your voice croaks in your throat. You stretch your new vocal chords.

‘Speak now,’ he says, positioning a black iron nail in the gap next to your kneecap. He weighs up a wooden mallet in his other hand.

You groan. ‘Torture don’t work on me.’

‘What is your name? Who are your conspirators?’

‘Gods and fortune.’

Thock. You flinch. Cold metal pierces soft tissue and embeds in bone. ‘You a gods-fearing man, mister Apex?’

‘No, not especially.’

You stare forwards. A flash. Thunder. Wind. The flames in the brazier flutter.

‘Can’t say I’m surprised. My advice? Pray.’

‘Pray?’

‘Aye, pray, mister Apex. We’ll be meeting them soon enough.’

Leona Storey



Leona Storey (yes, that is her real name, thank you very much!) grew up within a small village in the heart of England. She wrote her first story when she was just seven years old and very kindly asked if her dad could publish it for her. For obvious reasons, this didn't happen, but she never lost her zest for reading and writing. Graduating with a BA in Creative Writing from the

University of Roehampton in 2018, she went on to do an MA in the same discipline at the University of Manchester.

She published her first novel, *Pride*, with an independent press within the U.K. in 2020. She hopes to secure an agent and traditionally publish with her next novel, *Maple*.

When 23-year-old Missy Miller gets attacked, she luckily escapes from her assailant only to find out that no-one noticed she'd been missing for two days. In an attempt to get her alcoholic mother's attention and care, she decides to make herself a missing person. But when she finds out why her father killed himself when she was just ten years old, can she ever look at her mother the same way again?

A dual-narrative novel, *Maple* looks at family, relationships and the lengths people go to get what they want.

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Maple

PROLOGUE

The first sound Missy Miller could remember was the gunshot.

You'd think that a ten-year-old would remember other sounds before this: a mother's laugh, or perhaps a mother's scolding. A school-bell ringing, a child in the playground taunting them. But for Missy, the tangled mess of memories that happened before her father's suicide on a hot July day in sleepy, suburban Illinois were just that: a tangled mess.

Childhood for Missy was never easy, but her father had been the happiest part of her life. Despite his frequent absence when working back-to-back shifts at the bar-restaurant in the heart of their small town, he always seemed to be there. She often joined him in the same garage he would later take his life in, swaying from one bare foot to the other as she watched him slide back and forth under various cars.

The cars would change with the seasons, his back sweaty from lying on a skateboard for easy manoeuvrability. By the side of him, a beat-up leather radio would be playing WEBN, belting out rock songs, full of words a child shouldn't be learning. It wasn't reckless, or negligent, but naive. Missy was Mike's first and only child. It was the kind of humorous mistake new parents make.

There was so much innocence in both father and child. Afternoons in the garage were spent fixing up old cars and

SUVs, selling them to make a little extra money to afford the brand coffee and the cable bill, listening to age-inappropriate songs. He let Missy hold the spanner, or the changer fluid, or the crocodile-bites for the battery. Nothing too dangerous.

Mike kept his lonely daughter company. He sympathised with her inability to meet children her own age. His wife, Meredith, had fought hard to home-school their child. She told him she didn't trust teachers to give the best education possible. That she could do a better job. That it was their best option.

But in the end, it was guilt that took Mike's life rather than sadness. A guilt that followed him for years. But Missy never knew this. She never knew why her father killed himself.

Mike Miller had put the handgun into his mouth, the cool metal sliding between his dehydrated lips. When he pushed off the safety and pulled the trigger, sending a small bullet through the back of his throat, he hit his brain stem at just the right angle. He'd researched it, refusing to become a vegetable that Meredith would have to water to keep alive. He was considerate even in the depths of his despair, placing a brown tarp behind him before shooting himself. It became splattered with chunks of flesh, something you would buy in bulk at outlet supermarkets. You'd chop it up, sizzle it in a pan until the fat melts out and eat it.

Missy was the first to find him motionless, his right hand resting on his slightly protruding beer-belly, gun hanging loosely from his left. The sound, stapled to her memory, re-appeared in her mind whenever she heard a car backfire or kids playing with firecrackers. Or maybe, sometimes, it was an actual gunshot. Somewhere off in the streets that Missy lived close to.

After Mike's death, Meredith decided to move across the state border and into Illinois. She was unable to stay in the

happy family home surrounded by memories of him. She would've had to bleach the house from the roof to the basement to be free of every part of him. The dusted skin flakes, fallen hairs on pillows, wire-like pubes in the shower drain. The only option was to leave. Meredith didn't even take any of the furniture. She let it rot.

The sale of the house kept them afloat, though they felt as though they were drowning, swimming through the grief of losing a father, a husband. Meredith knew money wouldn't last forever, but she couldn't work the same way Mike did. Who would home-school Missy if not her? It wasn't as though she could send her to public school. Looking after a child and not working seemed impossible: she'd simply have to be frugal with their finances.

They moved into a rickety apartment complex that used to be owned by the government before a pair of investors bought it out and hiked up the rent. It was still within a less than desirable neighbourhood, so it could only fetch so much. So much was the only price Meredith could afford for a two-bed with used furniture thrown in.

Missy didn't like her bedroom in their new apartment. She was too young to understand how her mother could have felt in the aftermath of Mike's death and resented her for changing their life so much. She couldn't resent her father or even think about him. His voice was fading so quickly in her memory. Whenever she recalled her pleasant memories of late July evenings spent fixing cars, her father would become dead in every single one. Underneath bonnets, or sliding out from skateboards, still and lifeless. Darker than black blood dripping from what used to be a mouth.

The home-schooling faltered; Meredith was unable to keep her mind to one subject for longer than five minutes. As soon as the clock turned three p.m., she would drink a bottle

of wine in front of the television, watching *Jerry Springer* reruns until sleep came, hugged by alcohol. Enough to stop the memories of Mike spilling through into her dreams.

It was surprising to Missy how easily you could fall into a new definition of normalcy. Eating ramen noodles each night while watching her mother drink their dwindling money away, sleeping on the threadbare couch.

Missy got through the years in a blur, watching her body develop and her boredom increase. She decided to start leaving the apartment and escape the dusty, stagnated air.

Being home-schooled for so long meant a strange sort of solitude followed Missy everywhere she went. She would be looked at by the fellow neighbourhood kids as an outsider, unable to understand why she wasn't at their school. But these kids, like Missy, were saddled with lousy parents. They were inclined to go out to the streets, breaking non-existent curfews. It didn't take much loitering around for a somewhat pretty sixteen-year-old girl to slot into their dynamic.

The teenagers gave little notice to Missy's presence, even once they had accepted her as a new part of themselves. They hung out in public parks and fenced-off fields until the sun settled over Illinois. They often congregated in the abandoned children's playgrounds: spindly legs gripping rusting monkey bars while the couple of the week, lying on the red plastic slide, displayed too much affection.

Missy's heart squeezed when she looked at them, but she couldn't tell if it was from her own desire, or the resurfacing memories of her parents kissing.

'Ignore them,' one of the kids said to Missy, catching her staring at them. 'That pair once fucked in front of us. They don't give a shit about no-one.'

Missy stayed in the background for the most part, wishing to be under night's cover, feeling safety in the star-spotted

sky. It made her feel like she was gone, missing. Like she could disappear into the blackness of it, and not one of these people would notice.

A boy named Wesley took Missy's virginity just weeks after she started fitting in. He seduced her with platitudes of fake care, like most teenage boys who were desperate to stick their dick into something. Anything.

When they had sex, he told her he liked her green eyes. But he never compared them to the colour of summer grass, or freshly picked mint. He ran his hand through her hair, the same ginger as her mother's. Yet he tugged through the tangles, pulling her scalp, causing her to wince. He opened the trunk of his car, asked her to bend over, and fucked her, not caring that it was her first time.

After that, Missy didn't bother hanging out with the street crowd or Wesley again. They didn't notice when she disappeared. They barely knew her name. Wesley had gotten what he wanted. She was not permanent. She was always replaceable.

All Missy wanted was to be an adult. She was tired of teenagers and was becoming concerned with money. The fridge was always so empty of late. Missy set out to learn how to drive her mother's old '88 Taurus and get a job.

A shoddy diner called Horton's, off route eighty-eight, employed her as a part-time waitress. For half the week, she'd drive down the deserted roads, far above the speed limit, and wipe tables, serve food, and clean crap off the public toilet seats. It paid a little below minimum wage, but the tips were good, and the manager didn't ask for anything official, like social security numbers. Missy liked it because she didn't want to ask her mother to find all the right documents. She didn't even know if her mother had those kinds of documents anymore.

With no real basis, Missy believed without doubt that she would rise within her role. She arrived on time every day. She always did what was asked of her. Her father would've been proud. And her mother, too, if she ever noticed. Missy was so good at her job that she never stole money from the tip jar, except that one time when she *really* needed gas. Her boss, Mr. Velez hadn't even noticed, so it was like it hadn't even happened.

A year into working there, the head waitress left, leaving the position to be filled. The new title didn't mean much besides a fifty-cent pay rise and the ability to delegate to the other waitresses when Mr. Velez was away. To Missy, it meant power and control. Things she had so desperately lacked from every other aspect of her life so far. But she didn't get it.

When the opportunity came up again a couple of years later, when Missy was twenty, Mr. Velez hadn't even considered her as a prospect. After the previous failure to secure the promotion, Missy had really believed she would be the only candidate. Valentina Vacchiano, a woman in her late thirties with more kids than she had fingers, got the promotion over Missy.

How could Mr. Velez *not* consider her, when she was so clearly better than her colleagues? Especially Valentina Vacchiano! Missy'd put three years into this job. Her youth that had turned into labour. Poured down the drain and into the plumbing of Mr. Velez's pockets.

'What the *fuck*, Mr. Velez?' She stormed through his always closed office door, not bothering to close it behind her.

He sat behind his desk, his hands on his laptop keyboard. 'Missy,' he started. 'Please calm down. You are just twenty. Valentina needs this promotion. She has kids to feed. You're still living with your mother.'

‘That’s not fair. Valentina steals all the uneaten cakes at the end of her shifts. She gives them to her fat-ass children.’

‘I know and I don’t care, they’re only going in the dumpster anyway.’ Mr. Velez took his black-wire rimmed glasses off. He rubbed his forehead with his thumb and two forefingers. ‘I don’t want to be dealing with you, Missy. You’re a good worker but you are replaceable.’

It was an affront that Missy had never been given before, a slap directly to the ego. Her brain worked quickly, trying to worm its way out of understanding what he was saying. It wasn’t that she wasn’t good enough for the job, or too young, or simply less in dire need of the position. No: it was that Mr. Velez himself could not see her for what she was worth. He, a man of little intelligence and no real skills, couldn’t be expected to understand her brilliance.

In time, she’d be appreciated. She decided to just keep waiting.

But three years after Valentina got the promotion over Missy, little had changed. Missy kept wiping tables, serving food, cleaning toilets. Occasionally, she’d even be in charge of making the smash patties on the griddle. If that wasn’t improvement, what was?

Every fortnight on a Friday was the tip-shelling-out day. It was an eagerly awaited day for the staff at Horton’s Diner. On a cool evening at the end of spring, Missy was on one of the Friday night shifts, and she was eagerly awaiting her share of the week’s tips.

‘It’s \$300 for Val, and \$200 for the rest of us,’ one of Missy’s co-workers, Vivienne, said after counting the cash. She handed it out one by one until she got to Missy. ‘Here you go.’ Vivienne said, holding out the money, chewing gum between her teeth loudly.

Missy took it, trying and failing to hide her disgust at the

smacking sounds the gum was making. 'You took too long to count. My shift ended five minutes ago. I better get paid for that.'

'It's five fuckin' minutes-'

'So what?' Missy shoved the \$200 into her bra. It was a big wad of cash, looking bigger than it was because it was mostly made up of \$1s and \$5s, so she put half into one cup and half into the other. She stared Vivienne in the eye the entire time. Vivienne stopped chewing as she watched, somewhat bewildered. 'Gum is disgusting, by the way.'

Missy turned on her heel and left the diner, flitting by the tables, past customers who didn't notice her. The door rang out, striking the bell, as she left.

It was pitch black outside of Horton's aside from the floodlights at the carpark entrance that signalled to all drivers on I-88 that there was a place to eat and piss. She couldn't see much other than one man sitting in his car, looking like he was texting. Missy took no care and walked away from the lights and into the carpark.

She tugged the knot at the nape of her neck and again at her hips, undoing the apron as she walked. Seeing her car, she reached into her right pocket and pulled out the ring that only held two keys: the one for the apartment, and the one for the car.

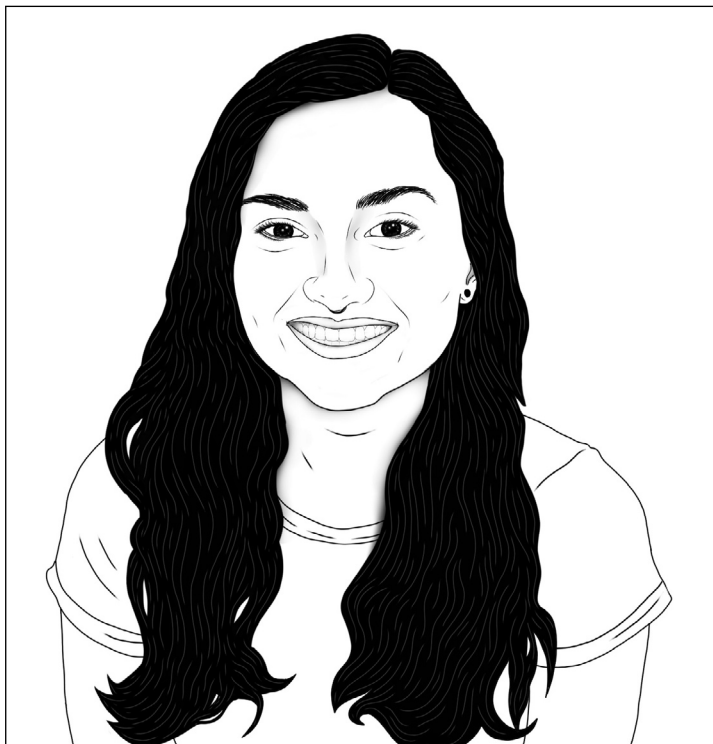
Missy opened the trunk of her car. The light didn't come on. She was unsurprised: she couldn't remember when it stopped working.

Somewhere across the carpark, a car door slammed shut. Missy flinched, loud noises always reminding her of her father, as used to the grief as she was. She balled up the apron, ignoring her better instincts, and threw in with her other spare work clothing. She reached up, grabbing onto the trunk door and slammed it shut.

It echoed against the silence of the parking lot. She could hear someone walking, the unmistakable crunch of the car park's gravel. Just as she was about to pull the keys out of the trunk lock, Missy felt a slam on her head, heavy and metal.

She blacked out.

Shannon Benson



Shannon Benson was born in rural Northern Ireland but now lives and works in Manchester. In 2018, she completed her degree in English Literature at Queen Mary University of London and went on to study for an MA in Creative Writing in order to pursue a career in writing. She writes short stories which often

experiment with horror and the surreal. Shannon aims to unsettle her readers, and through a macabre lens she examines themes such as deteriorating relationships, intimacy, and the changing body. She is currently working on a novel which explores a woman's fractured identity in the wake of her sister's death. 'What Stays Under' is a short story.

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What Stays Under

There is a feeling of weightlessness in lying here, of floating in the ether.

I often only feel the texture of the wood when I first lie down. After the lid is shut and locked and I'm pushed back under, I lose all feeling in my skin, as if the darkness has dissolved it away. I seep into that darkness, mingle with it and spread into the space. I ooze into the grain of the wood, the impenetrably shadowed corners, around the curled head of the nails, tightening them, keeping it all together. There is no space to lie on my side, to curl up, or stretch out. There is no blanket or pillow, no softness or attempt at comfort.

All that exists is this rectangle of darkness and me.

I had been living here for about a year when things started to change.

It happened in the evening, or what he told me was the evening. I can never tell because the windows are always covered in sheets of mould-speckled cardboard. I had been dozing, eyelashes raking through the darkness when sudden movement jostled my stomach loose. It was a familiar sensation, the feeling of being pulled out like a drawer. Then came the scratching sound of the key in the lock, and then, light.

Always artificial, the dusty gold illumination from the bare lightbulb hanging overhead. The light gives me my body

back after all those hours of darkness. It reminds me that I have arms and legs, a torso buckled with ribs, hands paler than anything I've ever seen. His face is always the first thing visible. I am to remain lying down until he gives the order. As soon as he utters 'Up!', the word resolute and tinged with a deep red, I stand. Other times I lie in wait for the word, but it never comes; instead he grabs my arm and drags me up himself. These times are the worst.

I got the order that day and stood, shaky on forgotten legs. In stepping out of my box I faltered, keeling forward like I was falling off a pitching boat. But he caught me, warm hands holding my arms with no intention to hurt. He righted me in a business-like fashion, staring down at his feet afterwards as if he was shy.

The rest of it went as it always did. He had everything ready as usual, she sat and stared from the corner as usual, and I obeyed, as usual. But something had changed between the two of us; a softness had intruded like a bruise in an apple.

After he finishes, I clean myself in the bucket they bring in, use another bucket for a toilet, and then he brings me food. Always scraps of what they must have had for dinner. Half-eaten bowls of congealed pasta, nibbled slices of soggy bread, the fatty chewy bits of meat. I eat without tasting, shoving it into my mouth with brittle fingers. She always stays and watches me eat. She's always watching me, except when I'm in my box. I hunch over the bowl and try to ignore her eyes cursing me and my body.

Whenever he hands me my food, I see the same softness in him I saw when he caught me. I dream about us having dinner together, without her eyes sticking damp and cloying to our every move.

When it is time for me to go back, she stands. It is always her who makes me go back, never with words but with the force radiating from her sparse, ropey body. She is almost as skinny as me. I wonder if he limits her to one meal a day too.

After being out, I have a heightened awareness of the reality of my box. A mist hangs over it; fleshy and strangely sweet. The wood is marked with a collection of stains like a patch test for paint. It is rancid but it is all me. When I look down at it before stepping in, I can already feel it pulling me away from the room, the room in which I can move and sit and eat, the room in which I scream and bleed and beg.

When they climb into bed at night, I hear them above me, the sagging creak of the bed as their bodies settle into rest. Sometimes I hear them whispering, and sometimes they preserve the silence; leave it thick and untouched like icing on a freshly decorated birthday cake. Sometimes I hear him use her. It's gentler than what I know from him, but she still cries. Her pathetic little whimpers curl into the mattress and travel down to fall by my face and shrivel into nothingness.

I stopped crying long ago.

Nausea quivers in my gut and wakes me.

The air in my box feels fuzzy, like I'm breathing in warm pellets of dust. There are a few drill holes carved into the box, little mouths pulling in the air, force-feeding it to me.

When my stomach contracts and my mouth heaves open, I bang my fist against the wood. Between retches I shout for help. He was not happy when I vomited in here before, I do not want to repeat that. After a few minutes of shouting and banging I begin to plan where to direct it, where it will be least likely to get into my hair. There is not enough room for me to lie on my side, so I begin to slowly inch my body to the

right. As I angle my head to the left movement sends me reeling, the scratch sounds, and light intrudes.

It is not the warm artificial light I am used to, it is pale and all-consuming, striking itself into my retinas and leaving me blind and blinking. I feel a large plastic bowl pressed into my hands and I angle myself over it; holding my remaining hair back with one hand I vomit into it, acid burning my throat. My stomach convulses until I am empty; I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and open my eyes.

It's her. She stands over me, mouth drawn tight and stretched across her angular face. Her face reminds me of Halloween witches masks, all pointy chins and small pinprick eyes.

Hatred surges within me but then I notice it, why the light is so different.

The cardboard sheets are off the windows. The light, bright and dazzling, is sunlight.

From here I can see the tops of trees, the spire of a church, the tracks of telephone wires. From here I can see the sky. Incandescent blue, the sun a white hole burnt into it, glaring down and into the room. I can feel myself expanding. Sitting up itself an act of unfurling, of moving upwards, towards the window. Fresh air heaves into me, replacing the pollution.

She clears her throat and I tear my eyes away from the day to look at her.

'Are you done?' she asks, voice quiet, stiff.

I nod, my head flicking back to the window. I didn't know it was summer.

She pulls the bowl from my hands as I watch a flock of birds climb through the sky. The sun's warmth falls on my face and my body and I have an urge to hide myself from it. I am the colour of a raw potato's flesh, watery pale, limbs like the twisted sprouts they grow when you leave them in the

cupboard too long. I realise she is watching me, of course she's watching me, she is always watching, but this time is different; her face is less tight, it's slack and unwound like a broken clock. Our eyes meet and her mouth quivers open but then closes.

I lie back down. As she shuts the lid I try and get one last glimpse of the sky, but her face blocks it.

That night I wait for the movement, but it never comes.

All I get is the thrum of darkness. My pulse courses through it, vibrates in time with the enforced night until my body feels buoyed up by it all, floating on waves of shadows and blood. Eventually I hear them get into bed. They do not talk. They have never gone to bed without letting me out before; even if he doesn't want me, I still get food. I think back to last night, did I offend him somehow? Was I not good enough? Did I do something wrong?

I am so hungry I cannot sleep. My teeth latch around a nail, clip its edge in a ferocious repetition until it breaks; I pull and tear until the crescent sits patiently on my tongue. I swallow, wonder for a brief second what stomach acid does to nails, do they break down or just lie there and collect inside the pocket of my stomach? Will they continue to grow and one day stab me from the inside out? In the dark I think less about the external body and more about the internal. It's like not being able to see my body strips me of any palpable presence. It helps with ignoring the pain. I am no longer made of skin or fat or hair; I only exist as a vast collection of cells and synapses and organs all quivering and murmuring together in the darkness. The box is more my body now, something to contain the throbbing threads of me. I feel that if it were to open, I would just spread and spread, curling my veins and my muscles and my entrails out across the world, a vast forest of the disembodied.

At some point the bed creaks and I hear her leave the room. I can tell it's her because of the light footsteps. I assume she's going to the toilet, but she never comes back. I lie awake until the alarm clock clatters alive and his feet thud to the ground. As he walks by, he kicks my box. He does this every morning to wake me up, to include me in his day.

The next night, as he leads me over to the straps, my gaze slips and lands on her.

She is broken. Eyeballs floating in a tub of pulverised meat. Our gazes meet and she blinks slowly. There are lines of dried blood crusting across her face. I wonder what she did to deserve that from him. I must hesitate because he shoves me harder and then straps me in tighter than usual. From the moment that leather bites into skin, I know that this will be one of the worst times.

Afterwards, I will blame her.

The cardboard is off the windows again. There are clouds in the sky today, crinkled little things. She stands above me dangling a pair of jogging bottoms and a large white T-shirt. Her face is less swollen, but it has decayed into a darker stage of purple; the same shade that covers my body.

'Put these on', she says, dropping the clothes in my lap.

Soft cotton loose over a concave stomach. It feels strange to wear clothes again, like some sort of step backwards; the past threatening to swallow me.

'I want you to clean the bathroom,' she says, voice slow and even like she is talking to a child. 'Can you do that?'

I nod my acceptance at her feet, follow her out of the room, through a small carpeted hall and into the bathroom. I have never been in here before; all my toilet needs are answered by a number of buckets. The room is small and grimy, the

mirror speckled with toothpaste. Mould creeps up the walls and spreads itself out on the ceiling.

‘Do it quickly,’ she mutters. Drops a bucket filled with bleach, window spray, and sponges at my feet, and then she’s gone, sloped off down the dark narrow stairs.

My breath stutters, she’s leaving me alone. I stagger further into the bathroom, look wildly around it, then duck out and stare down both ends of the hall. I don’t know what this is, some sort of trap, or the beginning of one of their games. Fear prickles its way down my body.

I start cleaning, splashing bleach indiscriminately, scrubbing until my wasted arms ache.

When I reach the mirror, I realise I haven’t seen my face in over two years. It’s fractured and warped, a faint echo of what I remember. Scars criss-cross flesh, bones protrude with an aggressive assertion, nose crooked from when he broke it. I am a jagged thing. I look mean, feral, wild, but I feel far from any of those words.

‘Are you done?’

The words cut through the encroaching memories. I look at her with the afterimage of my reflection lingering behind my eyes, it hangs above her face and I notice the similarities. That same watered-down milk complexion, two sets of hollowed-out eyes staring at each other. She will lie and tell him she cleaned the bathroom and it fills me with anger. I think about what would happen if I could tell him that it was my work. Would he punish her for lying? Would I suddenly be the one sleeping in bed with him at night? And her, in the box, only taken out to hurt. I would watch her every move as she watches mine, punish every mistake.

‘You stink,’ she says.

She stares at me for a long time, the smell of bleach radiates off the walls and mingles with her gaze, burning into

me. I assume she will hit me soon; she hasn't hurt me in a while.

'You should have a shower,' is all she says.

I don't move. I don't know if he wants this, if this would anger him, if this is her plan to drive us apart, to make him distrust me.

She makes a noise in the back of her throat, rough and brittle. 'Just get the fuck into the shower.'

I strip, clothes clumping off like dead flesh. As I climb into the shower, she leaves the room, closing the door behind her. I had forgotten about warm water, the way it works its way into your muscles. How the warmth feels almost viscous, enrobing you in the moment, resin-like. A few weeks' worth of grime and blood loosens and whirls down the plughole. When I wash my hair, I am gentle with it so not too many clumps fall out. Afterwards my skin is bright pink, itchy clean and singing with light.

When I climb back into my box, I feel guilt settle over me like a shroud.

He is alone.

The stool she usually sits on is empty, the air radiates quaveringly around the absence.

As soon as I am standing, he grabs me, fingernails biting into the loose skin of my arm. He says something about me being clean. The exact words get washed away by the sound of my blood thumping in my head. He says something about making me dirty again.

These are the moments that an absence is required. I usually think about my box. Its darkness and the pulsing of the unbodied me within it, swimming in the nothingness like some prehistoric creature in the depths of the ocean. The ever-present threat of my spilling out and curling myself around the world.

Afterwards he brings me a plate of sausages and mash, still warm. I stare at the food and a drop of blood falls from my nose and into the mash, mixing pink and powdery. When I look up at him, he smiles a shiny quivering smile.

She pulls me out in the early morning, not long after he kicked my box.

'Up', she says, echoing him. It makes me angry that she is so entitled to think she can use his words. The jogging bottoms and top land in my lap. As I dress, she grabs a small handbag off the bed with a panicked fluidity and opens it; inside lie a few £20 notes and a crumpled piece of paper.

'I want you to go to the shop for me,' she states. 'There is £80 in there and the list of what I want.'

It's a set-up, I know it is. She's trying to frame me, to turn him against me, to break the trust we've built between us. But there is no way for me to say no to her. I feel the bag getting shoved onto my shoulder, trainers forced onto my feet. Her fingers dig into the exact spot of my arm his did last night, as if she knows, as if she wants to damage the softness blooming between us. She drags my body into the hall and down the stairs. At the front door she crumples a hand-drawn map into my hand.

'The shop is a ten-minute walk away, straight down there,' she points to the right with a bony finger. 'And then you turn left. It is opposite the train station.'

She pushes me out. The day is scalding bright, a million different colours rush towards me and catch in my eyes. Panic tingles across my skin and I feel goosebumps form despite the warmth of the sun. I am standing on a doorstep, a little path cuts through an immaculate garden leading onto the pavement. In the exact centre of the garden is a glittering stone birdbath. The road is filled with identical detached

houses. I struggle to focus on any one thing and fight the urge to close my eyes and run back.

My body turns and moves me in the direction she pointed. The streets are quiet but every time a car passes, I think it's him. I cower into the shadows of buildings, follow a meandering choreography of hesitation. The pavement is busy with cracks and weeds. I pass a house leaking out a jumble of discordant music, like a bad smell. An old woman walks by me, the force of her body pushes a wave of air out and it grates against my skin like an assault.

I turn a corner and see the train station across the road. A single-story red-bricked building stretching itself in front of the tracks. A woman wheels a pram out of the door, and I catch a glimpse of grubby waiting rooms. I do not recognise the name of the station, have no idea where I am, where in relation I am to what was once home. There are things within me that I have learned to turn away from. If I could, I would cut these things out like a cancer, then I would be complete.

I stare at the station, memories flickering before my eyes. A car drives by, cuts my view off, and I see him looking out at me, his face pressed against the window. My stomach clenches and I shove myself into the shadows. Only when I hit the stone of the building behind me do I realise it wasn't him.

I stay like that, palms flat against the stone. It rasps against my flesh forcing grit in between layers of skin. I long for the feel of wood. The grocery store looms to my right, the aisles sterile and too bright, there is too much space and too little shadow in there. I know if I were to go in, I would get lost; that my feet would slip on the shine of the floor, that I would grow smaller and smaller under the glaring blaze.

I suddenly notice how ragged my breathing is, how sweat-soaked my T-shirt is. I am shaking, insides grinding together. Another car goes by and I flinch. He must not see me. I know

I cannot go into that shop. I know what my body wants. I fix my eyes on the pavement and follow it, all the cracks leading back to the neat garden and up to the front door.

Before I can knock, she opens it; stands like a curved beast in the doorway, blocking my entrance. I can see the anger sharpening her eyes, I know she wanted him to catch me. She doesn't move to let me in, so I push by, my body brushing against hers. I drop the handbag at her feet and move slowly up the staircase.

I lay myself down into the box. Closing the lid, I sink into the darkness. Open my mouth so it curls into me, and within it lose myself.

Moli Lloyd Evans



Moli Lloyd Evans grew up in North Wales. Her poetry explores the formation and sustainment of relationships in modern society, often dwelling on the things unsaid. She wants her poetry to navigate the difficult, and sometimes uncomfortable truths of pursuing companionship, reaching for a candid reflection of the world in which we live. She relies on imagery and language play to build a strange and uneasy tone in her writing. In addition to

her love of poetry, Moli enjoys walking in the countryside (preferably to the pub). Growing up surrounded by nature often provides creative inspiration for her work.

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At the End of the Phone

She picks up. The voice asks her
what she's eaten, is she okay, how
many steps were taken to the bus,
was it cold and is there anything
to report like last week's promotion.
The voice is okay too, teases
the phone cable between finger
and thumb, leaning
slightly
on the cabinet,
one foot in a slipper
and another misplaced,
or forgotten. The voice is okay.

She answers. The voice wants to hear:
tomato soup from the tin, a little
full of something caught,
seventy-two steps, cold
with the mischief of winter sun and a boy
with arms to carry the weight
of a bad day. The voice
is okay too, sits by untouched plate,
bladder dry, volume high, resting
head in hand
to release the skull
from the candle wick
neck. The voice is okay.

She stares at a phone undisturbed.
She thinks of the moment

a cinema becomes a room, a nod
to refusing dessert, a mouth
falling open on a pillow, the sand
in the footwell of a car,
the half-sip from a glass,
the tube stop in zone six,
lights out at the supermarket,
a cone without ice-cream,
the final ring before the beep.

On the Fifteenth Floor

Time is a childish thing,
never reads the mood of a room before a declaration.
It speaks in your dull accent and expensive suit,
I look far down at the pavement mottled in smudges

of distinct length and pace. Some slow and patient,
others as fast as they can bear, like insects shrugging off
the last of a rainfall. *You can have the bookcase
if it will fit in the lift.* I asked you once

what our empty window boxes mean to other people.
Now I want the watercolour teapot, Victorian birdcage
and bamboo rocking chair. Your hands
don't belong to you as they exaggerate your talk

of halves. *And the leather ottoman is yours.* Our days
spent in the kitchen, you chewing over that something
about waking up fifteen floors above the postman.
The sun takes its time with the floorboards as always

and now you're talking magazine subscriptions. I never felt
that something. *I'll give you plenty of time.* I'll give you
the Japanese paper knife and the geometric lampshade.
But time, already escaped us for something better.

Home

I loved the Tudor arch with trumpet vine,
texture of the sun-dried brick,
sweet pea on the porch step.
Letterbox in royal blue, moonflower

spilling out the guttering, ginger cat
basking. I could leave
the front door swinging, hot sun
curling into the hilltops and we would

spin barefoot in the tall, emerald grass.
Cool off together on the bathroom tiles
with June greasing the backs
of the beetles. Cabbage flies tunnelled

into July's meaty crop, we smoked cigars
on the rosewood decking. Skin cracking
at the knees and elbows, August
felt like hot butter in a pan.

I know the end came long before we left,
lying on the driveway legs extended,
aphids alive in the air. Autumn never
came, bulbs opening, trees abandoning

a turn of season. Everything unfallen,
just a mighty, bloated heat. We begged
for the birds to move on, covered ourselves
in juice from the aloe vera. It got hotter,

November spent on the tiles, the wallpaper
starting to peel. He tried to comfort me
with our palms coated in salty oil,
our porch step like smouldering coal.

All the framed faces drooped to the floor,
the ginger cat left us
and followed the fox into the burning
woodland, I could not cry. Kneeling

at the freezer our ears rang, faces blistered.
Panting dogs with tongues swollen, January
never came. And when it was finally time
to go, we held each other and never left.

Tulips

Heat of the Red Light
on our cheeks, dust
from the two wheelers
dressing up the cobblestones.

Rows of bobbleheads
in yellow, plum and magenta,
a hundred upright fists
towards the blackened sky.

You press me
against a closed barber shop,
your breasts to mine. And so,
I tell you I crouch down

in the shower when I'm sad.
Like a salesman
I ease you in gently.
Tell you the water tunes

my body like a violin,
a body full of sinking purrs.
Palm to lamppost
you circle the city

and I ask you your name
again. You say you hate
looking too much like yourself
in pictures. In the crystalline

lights you look like
you belong
under almond blossoms.
Over the waxen canal

I tell you I want bad things
to happen to me so I can smell
affection in white bouquets.
You take me

to a beat-up hotel and I lose
inches from the things I say,
Until, like flowers -
you know the rest.

Plant Food

in the air pockets of the morning
flood you talk with your mouth
full so i watch
the cud of your bran flakes, churning
like butter and i wonder
if you ever think of your age.
that sound from your gullet
is the thing i hate the most

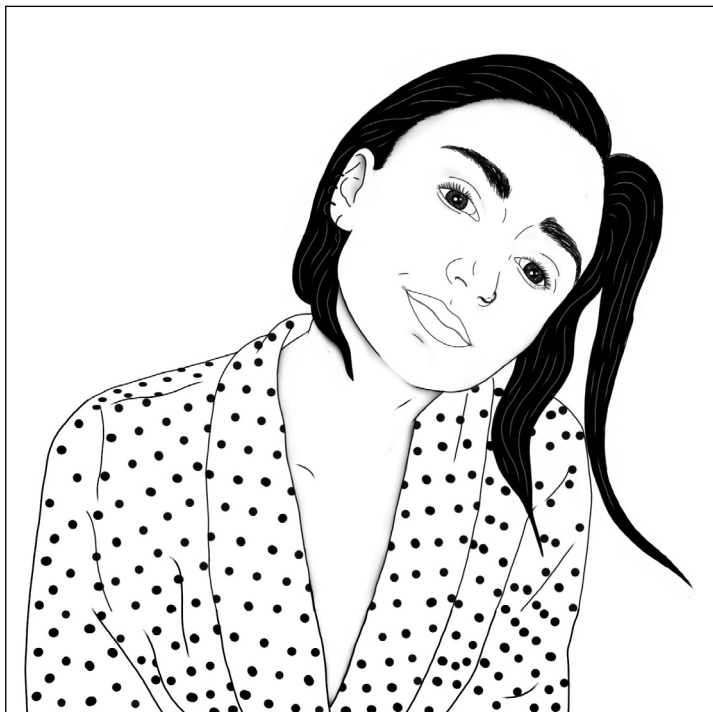
and i just can't recall a version
of your company i enjoy.
the things i could say pass like snow
until you've left and i'm left
with the way you can't rehome a towel.
falling out of love
with you briefly lets me pause
on things. i think of what

you said about my mother last night.
i think of how you always talk
plant food with the neighbours. late
afternoon you're here again, so it's bad tv
and the shaded words when you speak
of our financials. once abed
i think of the way you text
only in capital letters.

as you slumber your fingers
find their way to the heat
of my body,

and even in sleep we move like wheel
and spoke. i think of how you always
talk to dogs like they know something
and how the first time
i saw you
was our third date. perhaps,
watering.

Rose Amelia Kelly



Rose Amelia Kelly is originally from Leamington Spa and now lives in Glossop, Derbyshire. She studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Warwick University, and the MA in Creative Writing at the University of Manchester. She writes modern realist fiction – a mixture of short and long form, and creative non-fiction. Her fiction has been described as having ‘structural

complexity and control', 'emotional weight' and 'vivid description', and her non-fiction has been characterised as displaying 'first-rate intellectual maturity, eloquence and elements of exceptional insight'. She is currently working on her first novel, *Adrift*, considering themes of mental health and queerness in a modern coming-of-age story. Her next project is a blended memoir tracing her late father's life and travels.

Attendance Allowance is the first chapter of a creative non-fiction project in progress – *White Rabbits: A Story About Luck*. The project will use place as its structure, as it retraces the author's late father's varied and complex life, following in his footsteps across the globe and closer to home. The project will examine her multifaceted relationship with her father and how it has impacted her life. The genre is a blend of place writing, memoir, travel writing and biography.

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Attendance Allowance

My father's rented bungalow squats quietly on a row of identical buildings. The bushes are taller than the window and the grass is overgrown. Parked outside is his surprisingly clean Renault. The front left tyre is completely flat. I gather my disjointed thoughts, my paperwork, and my nerves, and ring the doorbell. While I wait, I notice the recycling box is overflowing, and make a mental note to check the bin-days. I am waiting a long time.

When he opens the door, I see he has made an effort: he wears his smartest jumper, cable-knit, and some oat-coloured slacks. His moustache has been trimmed, but his chin is peppered with three days of white bristle. I know it is three days because I arranged and paid for the mobile hairdresser. One of many small details about his life that I am unaccustomed to knowing. He is uncomfortably happy to see me, pulling me in for a hug and kissing me sloppily on the lips in a manner that's made me feel awkward since I was a small child. What began as a hug becomes a necessary lean, as he loses his breath and wobbles. He asks me to fetch his stick, he thinks it might be in the front of the car. I settle him in his chair before taking the keys. There is a golf club resting against the wall in the hallway. A putter. I wonder what made him choose that club. It seems to me that a driver would be more appropriate for self-defence. But perhaps a putter is the

suitable metaphor for his life – no longer does he have the power needed for the long shots; he is reduced to small, slow movements.

I go and fetch his stick, and I'm surprised to discover it's covered with pictures of white tigers and has a shining silver handle. Not exactly his style.

'Oh, that thing...' He rolls his eyes. 'That's Pat's.'

Pat is my aunt, dad's older sister, a voluptuously outlandish woman to whom the pattern is certainly suited. Pat feeds the pigeons in her garden and pushes her dog around in a pink pram. It seems all the necessities of Dad's life are an embarrassment these days.

My visits to the bungalow are rare. For most of the decade that he's lived here he didn't allow me to enter, instead driving to meet me at a nearby cafe. These days, he has little choice but to let me in. The first thing I notice, that I cannot help but notice about the place, is the smoke. Or rather, the trail in its wake. Every surface is coated in that deep, tarry yellow, remembered from old pubs, pre-ban. The net curtains hang in the window like tripe, thick and sticky. His ashtray takes pride of place on the dining table, next to his knackered old laptop, plastic and whirring. The walls are such a remarkable shade of yellow you would think it was paint.

'Haven't they done a fabulous job!' my father declares, waving indiscriminately.

I look around dutifully. I am less than impressed. He is referring to the professional cleaners I arranged to come and deep-clean the bungalow, a 'deep-clean' that was completed two days before my visit. If this is the place post-clean, then I dread to think what it was like before. I mumble something non-committal, aware he is expressing gratitude, and offer to put the kettle on.

The kitchen is the worst room. For some inexplicable

reason there is recycling strewn across all the surfaces as if it's been thrown about. Empty milk bottles and Pinot Grigio bottles lie side by side, fallen soldiers in the same war. I ask him why; he tells me it's bin day. Not an explanation as far as I am concerned, but I leave it. I don't want to respond because I can feel a hysterical giggle bubbling in my chest. It's not funny, of course. It's a giggle of the breed sometimes released at a funeral: inappropriate and unwanted, an explosion of repressed emotion coming out backwards like escaping steam.

Making his coffee makes me want to wash myself, then everything in there, then myself again. There are dishes and mugs resting on the grey plastic drainer by the sink, but they are marred with scrapings of unidentifiable food scraps. The mugs are ringed with stains, brown dribbles down the sides. When I lift the drainer slightly, I see that beneath it is a thick, black substance, like an oil spill. I wonder again quite what I paid the cleaners for. I run the tap, Dad shouts that I should be careful, that the hot water is extremely hot. He's right, and as I wash the mugs and plates, I let it scald me, watching the skin of my fingers turn red and swollen. I boil the kettle, pour the instant coffee. He takes his with two sugars and a generous glug of Elmlea, that sort of buttermilk cream substitute. It separates slightly, leaving flecks of white fat whirling around in the hot, sweet liquid.

The main reason for this visit is to fill in some benefit forms and to get an idea of the latest prognoses for his various illnesses. The longest form to be completed is for the oddly named 'Attendance Allowance', an amount of cash he should in theory be eligible for, intended for things like cleaners, perhaps a gardener. General maintenance. Dad gets angry and tired when filling in forms, so here I am. It rather helpfully provides me with an excuse to ask him all sorts of

personal questions to which I would rather not have to know the answer, such as: can he wash himself, does he have any trouble using the toilet, etc etc.

As I turn the pages, I am overcome with a sense of injustice. Why, for goodness sake, am I responsible for this grubby and sad job? I am obviously not yet enough of an adult for this sort of thing. My younger brother and I are the products of his third marriage. I feel a wave of frustration towards my older half-siblings. If only they were not so utterly inept this would be their responsibility, and I could continue merrily on my way as the overgrown teenager, avoiding real life by overstaying my welcome in higher education. My half-sister (manic-depressive recluse) is fifty years old now. Surely at fifty, one feels enough of an adult to manage their elderly father's decline with some grace. My half-brother (alcoholic), is just two years her junior; wouldn't one's late forties be just the sort of age to swoop in bravely and help? As I think this, I disagree with myself. I am certain that none of us have a fucking clue what we are doing.

I persevere with the questions. We are both uncomfortable. When we complete the section about his illnesses and medication, he produces a printed list of his prescriptions. It is two pages long. The section about bathroom habits proves to be particularly hard. As he tries to describe his difficulties whilst also not giving me the details neither of us wish to hear aloud, he breaks down. I go over and wrap my arms around him. He doesn't smell like he can't wash. He just smells like my dad.

At this moment my subconscious mind provides me with a contrasting image. In this memory, I am around nine years old. In a previous life, my father belonged to an exclusive health club, and would take my brother and I swimming then buy us posh sandwiches and extravagant hot chocolates. I see

him preparing to dive into the pool, tall and strong with tanned skin, muscular shoulders and hair still mostly black. He dives, barely disturbing the water. In the present, he wipes his eyes and shrugs me off, asks if I mind if he smokes. I should mind, particularly as one of his more serious medical issues is COPD, but I say I don't. We both need a break.

I put the forms to one side, smooth out my jumper, take a sip of coffee. I ask him if he needs me to pick anything up for him – I could walk to the nearest shop. He puts his head to one side, looking like a bashful child about to ask for sweets. I know what he wants before he says it: fags. We have bonded, in the past, my father and I, as secret smokers. For years after my mum and brother thought I'd quit, we two would secretly enable one another. When I was a teenager, he bought me packs of twenty B&H Gold, shining, sharp-cornered and sophisticated, while my mum took a photo of me round the local newsagents, shrilly informing them that I was, in fact, only fourteen. Our history of conspiring has now left me in a complicated position. His smoking habit is unequivocally killing him: worsening his already terrible health, stealing his breath, his comfort, his minimal funds, his last few years. It is also, however, one of his few remaining pleasures. His life is entirely encased in these yellow walls. Naturally, I cave. I pick up my coat and take his keys. He gives me the empty pack to ensure I get the correct brand.

Outside, the fresh air is so delicious that I barely feel the cold. My coat and scarf stink. I resist the temptation to smell my hair; I know I've been doused. I walk past the melancholic bungalows, through the alleyway and around the corner to the small newsagents. It's such a relief to be *doing* something. The life admin I've completed thus far certainly counts as 'doing something', but walking, picking up an object and

coming back with it, that feels productive in a way that fills me with gratitude.

Inside the newsagents I wait calmly. I would happily wait all day. There is a delivery driver ahead of me in the queue. He's receiving payment from the elderly woman behind the counter, but there is some kind of negotiation going on, and she is counting out pound coins extremely slowly. The woman frowns, hands over the stack of coins and a few notes, signs his clipboard. She is so clearly irritated by his presence that I am taken completely off guard when she beams at me, warmly stretching out her hands, palms up, asking me what I need. This slight, maternal gesture is enough to break my fragile resolve, and suddenly tears spill down my cheeks. She takes my hand. Hers feels warm, dry and crisp.

'What do you need?' she says again. Her accent is lilting, gentle.

I hold out the empty pack of cigarettes which she takes, squinting at them before turning around and sliding open the cupboard door. There are so many things I need at that moment, things I'd like to tell her. I'd like her to hug me, to make me tea, to feed me something she'd cooked for her own children. While she looks for the cigarettes, I grab a bottle of Pinot Grigio on a whim. His other, simple, harmful pleasure. The woman takes the bottle, frowns at the label.

'These are two-for-one,' she says, pointing to the fridge.

I must look like I need two bottles. I follow her direction and collect the second one. I wipe my eyes and pay. All the while she focuses that smile on me, I feel solaced, thankful. I walk slowly back to the bungalow, getting my breath, wiping my face, squeezing my cheeks.

Once inside, I can see my father is tiring. His face is very pale, his skin flakes like stale pastry. I have come to understand that the trick is to ask him, or remind him, of a

time in his life when he had the energy and vitality he now misses. The present is of no use, it represents only discomfort, disappointment, loneliness. I search my brain for a suitable question. Coming up with nothing new, I remind him of the health club. This triggers him off happily, and he proceeds to tell me about all the receptionists that fancied him. Yeah, he's that guy.

One of the most frustrating elements of his situation now is that he shouldn't be here. Up until he retired, he was paid extraordinarily well. He is renting this miserable bungalow because of his penchant for expensive whiskies and cigars, half a cow for dinner each day (hence all the fun health stuff), posh cars and ridiculous spending sprees. These habits cannot possibly account for all of the money, and although I have no evidence, the only thing I can think of is quite an extreme gambling habit. Indeed, without prompting, he gleefully informs me that the most he made in a month was £63,000. Towards the end of his career his yearly salary was £175,000 plus commission (he worked in telecommunications for a huge, household name of a company).

I smile, make an oohing noise. A muscle under my left eye twitches. I offer to put the kettle on again. I need to get out of the room before I remind him of all the times I've had to order his shopping online with my last twenty quid.

I should try to enjoy it. My brother and I have no idea how much longer we will have the chance to be annoyed by him. He is seventy-seven now, with the body of a ninety-year-old. Once, he was a talented rugby player, he could throw the javelin like a champion. He was in the RAF; he's travelled the world, lived on tropical islands and spear-fished his own dinner. He made money as a teenager as a lookout for associates of the Kray twins. He had no formal education past the age of fourteen, yet he worked his way up the business

ladder, earned himself a position of status in the world. He grew up in central London with no money, living in one room with his two sisters and mother. He cared for them when his father died in a freak accident when he was six years old – stealing cartons of cigarettes from Marylebone station and selling them at school to pay for food. He took a job cleaning a local dentist's office, nicked the appointment cards and forged them for his classmates to bunk off. He was evacuated as a baby during WW2. He has a moustache that makes him look like Des Lynam; I used to think he presented *Match of the Day*. My mother once loved him.

On the train home I look through the photos on my phone. After Dad fell asleep, I'd tidied his place a bit, gone through some documents, made sure there were no important letters he'd not told us about. Rifling through the papers on his desk, I found an old photo, and took a picture of it. It was a photo of both my parents, at some sort of party or dinner. It must have been something posh – my mum wore a long blue dress with a silk shrug, and had her hair gathered at the back of her head. She looked so young. Happy. My dad wore a white tux jacket, with black trousers and waistcoat, a black bow tie. His hair was thick black, his moustache wider than it's been in years. I could see my own face, written across theirs. Years before I existed, yet there I was, smiling from their faces.

My dad was approved for Attendance Allowance two weeks before his death. The night before, he was posting on Facebook at 3.30am. I discovered after he died that he regularly trolled Piers Morgan on Twitter. I've never been prouder. As is the way with these things, there's been an explosion of information and emotion now he's gone. Dad and I had a thorny, messy and magical relationship, but now all his transgressions are forgiven, as if they never existed. The stories I'm being told push him firmly into the category

of superhero, right where he belongs. I'm already learning remarkable things about him that sound as if they're made up. But they're true. My dad is a remarkable man.

His death was very sudden, despite all his long-lived health complaints. I think when someone you love dies it's natural to second guess yourself, to constantly question whether you could've done more. I'm ashamed of the way my father was living in his final years, I would've loved to make him more comfortable. But in a way, I'm also strangely impressed. He lived absolutely on his own terms from beginning to end. Because, as he liked to say - 'J.F.D.I. Just fucking do it.'

William Frederick Michael Kelly

12/12/1942 - 27/04/2020

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