



MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY 2021



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

IX: The 2021 Manchester Anthology

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The 2021 Manchester Anthology

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Foreword

In one picture, I can see a bed, a dresser and mirror; in another a headboard, in a third it's the bare, wiped-clean surfaces of a shared office. Then there is a room which appears to have a corridor opening off it, and another with a whiteboard scrawled with to-do items, a room with a wall covered in photographs which will themselves find their way into a poem. One week, there was a shaky picture from Ghana. These are the backgrounds to the faces, squared off on my screen, whose weekly apparition on my laptop put me in touch with this anthology's contributors, the brilliant set of MA students who have just graduated from the Centre for New Writing.

Workshops should be intimate, challenging, soul-making places, rooms where technique and ambition develop week by week, slowly, steadily and then sometimes in quantum leaps. The online nature of university teaching, during the pandemic, did not stymie this good work; it did mean, though, that our students have remained at a physical distance from us, and from one another. *But* this anthology reminds me of some of this demanding year's unexpected new dimensions. Students' personal spaces have never been so present as part of our engagement with one another's work. There have been cats, changes of scene as these writers started to travel again, ghostly figures crossing rooms with armfuls of laundry or delivering cups of coffee. And, in peculiar new-normal circumstances, these writers have had to work with all their skill and resource to connect, to communicate in their stories, novels, memoirs and poems.

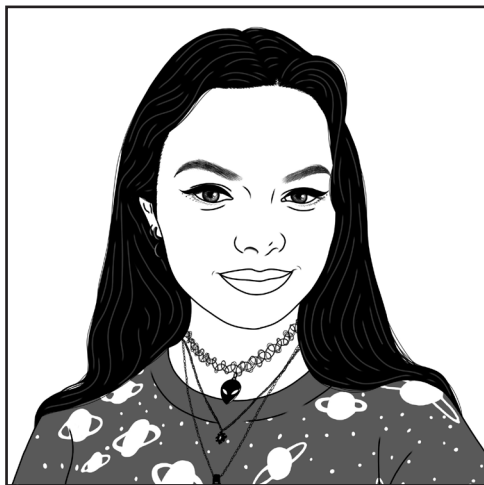
It has been a *pleasure* to watch how the work collected here has developed since its first airing in workshops, how writers have responded to peer feedback and how their work has grown through

Foreword

Careful, inspired revision. Reading the anthology's debut prose and poems, I'm tempted to say too that there is a greater intensity in this year's anthology, as if their working solo, *in solitary*, for so much of the year, has paid off. Although individual pieces are vividly populated with family and memory, with desire and society, with city scenes and relieving travel (imagined places – *The X Files!*, but Somalia, San Francisco, Portovenere, Leshan, Morocco, Miami, Macau, Mumbai and, of course, Manchester), the writers assembled here seem more than usually aware that we read alone: in this anthology, that imagined solitary reader is in focus, addressed, and gently ushered into a range of new worlds, into stories you will not easily forget. There is, as you, dear reader, will discover, great depth in these pieces, a strongly developed sense of situation, nicely imagined establishing shots; here, familiar places assume dazzling new purposes, even the jokes resonate with a bitter truth. God knows, we need these new storytellers and voices!

John McAuliffe, 2021

Louise Berger



Louise Berger was born in Germany, but made her getaway many years ago. Having explored various places since, she has adopted the English language to write about all that has slipped between the cracks of normalcy.

With a background in Philosophy, Anthropology, and the arts, she has become fascinated with states of displacement, be they physical or psychological. Her writing uncovers the surreal and strange that hides in people, unknown towns in the middle of nowhere, or right behind you—yes, right there.

Having written 'It Was Bound to Happen Eventually' specifically for this anthology, she is currently working on a novel about a man caught between choices and chance as the strange offer that has led him to a small seaside town near Atlantic City threatens to erase his identity.

Her fiction can be found in the *Electric Reads Young Writers' Anthology 2017*, on the pages to come, or broadcast straight into your nightmares.

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It Was Bound to Happen Eventually

‘They showed up and popped up that fence,’ the woman says as she stacks the donuts in the little pastry box for him. ‘Finished the job and left again, in less than twenty minutes or so.’ It is early afternoon but she looks tired already. The little donut shop opens early.

‘Really,’ he says, but it isn’t a question. ‘And then?’

She looks at him with that expression he’s gotten used to seeing. It is subtle, almost hidden, but he can tell.

‘Then what, Ed? One of them came in to buy some bottles of water. I asked if he wanted a donut with that and he said no, he didn’t.’ She pauses and shakes her head.

‘Who comes into a donut shop to buy water?’

‘What do I know, but it’s in bad taste.’ She hands him the box and smooths down her little apron—blue, like most things in the shop. It is the kind of powdery color he associates with candy or seaside cabins on Cape Cod, but not with donuts or any kind of pastry for that matter. Still, it covers the wall and the doorframes, the napkins, everything apart from the donuts themselves.

‘Maybe I should get some too.’ He looks around the shop idly, eyeing the little bulletin board with noteworthy things that have happened in town recently. She updates it every Friday, cutting out headlines and articles, usually about lost cats or bake sales.

There isn’t much to talk about in town nowadays.

‘At least you got donuts too,’ she says. ‘Do you want a bottle?’

‘Sure, why not.’ He watches as she wrestles with the plastic liner of a new pack. ‘Did they say anything about why that fence is there now?’

‘He,’ she says over the squealing of plastic. ‘It was only one of them. And no, just got his water and went on his way again—here you go. It’s warm. I didn’t think to restock the cooler.’

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‘That’s alright.’ He takes the bottle and wedges it under his arm. ‘You didn’t ask?’

‘I—it was early, Ed.’ Her eyes flick to the window, but the wire mesh fence is barely visible from here. ‘I leave others to do their business when I haven’t been awake for more than an hour.’ She pauses, the hum of the small fan by the entrance filling the silence, stirring around the sweet air. ‘It’s not for me to ask, but don’t you think it might be a good thing? It’s better than leavin’ it empty, isn’t it? After all those years...’

Ed says nothing but he looks at her, small behind the counter and picking at the sleeve of her blouse.

‘Sorry, well, anyways. Did you want anything else?’

‘That’s all.’ He shakes his head, trying to look friendly as she adds up the donuts and the bottle of water in her little calculator—this one white and not blue. He already knows it is \$6 for the donuts and another \$1.45 for the drink. So he plucks a couple of bills from his wallet and hands them to her, enough to cover what he owes and a little extra to buy a coffee for the homeless woman who stops by just before close. He might not know everything, but he knows enough. That is something he makes sure of. ‘And don’t worry about it, I’m the one who started asking questions.’ He turns and walks to the door.

‘Okay, Ed. Have a nice day and see you next Friday.’

The air outside is warm for late May and he thinks it will be one of those summers—a little too hot for his liking. Ed walks along the sidewalk until he is out of sight from the donut shop’s window, then beelines for the fence to inspect it.

Wire mesh panels have been propped up with bright orange plastic feet that look flimsy at first, but cracks and chips at the edges reveal the solid concrete inners that hold them in place. When he taps one with the tip of his shoe, a little more of the orange breaks off, but nothing else moves. Concrete is useful like that.

Why? He thinks and glances up at the house that sits slightly off-center on the mostly barren lot. *Why now?*

The house has been empty for years and has remained mostly unchanged during that time. He isn’t sure who owns it nowadays. The township, probably, claimed years ago to repossess debt. He thinks back to his childhood and wonders how the years have passed so quickly. The house barely feels real anymore.

‘They’re tearing it down to build a new grocery store. One of the

big ones, just not one of the good ones.’ Cathy walks quietly, like a cat. It’s one of the things he likes about her, but sometimes she catches him off guard. ‘Hey there, Ed.’ She greets him with a peck on the cheek and a hint of perfume—flowery, the one she has been wearing recently. ‘Whatcha got there?’

He hands her the box and she opens it.

‘Three glazed and one Strawberry pink.’ She brings them up to her face and inhales deeply.

‘I know you like those—’ he starts.

‘But I always get sick after eating just one. It’s sweet you remembered.’

Ed nods but says nothing more. After a moment, he finds himself looking back at the house yet again.

‘It’s sad, isn’t it?’ She stands next to him and flicks the end of one of the zip-ties that have been used to link the panels together. ‘They shouldn’t be doing this to you.’

‘Do you think about them a lot?’ she asks later, when they are sitting on a bench in a park, and at first he shakes his head. *No*, he wants to say but that is not true.

‘Sometimes I do,’ he admits. ‘Today more than usual.’

‘Of course. If I was you, I would think about them, like, always. I mean, I couldn’t imagine losing my parents that way.’ She has eaten half of the strawberry donut and licks a little bit of pink from the corner of her mouth. ‘It might not be healthy though, you know? They say it’s good to move on, even if it’s a difficult thing to do. All that is in the past and you’re not. You’re here with me, eating donuts.’

He doesn’t think there’s ever been a time where Cathy has been lost for words. He has heard them all before, column-like wisdoms that can go with almost any occasion—in particular *his* occasions—but at least they touch on some sense of truth. Only, he isn’t eating donuts. He hasn’t found the appetite today.

‘Maybe if you go back, it would be better? Say goodbye?’

They have had that discussion in the past when she catches him thinking about it, and it is never one he wants to have. He said goodbye years ago, but she doesn’t believe it.

‘Or maybe you just need to get away for a bit. Go somewhere else and distract yourself. Then, when you get back and it’s all changed, it will be over and you can pretend it never happened.’

‘That doesn’t sound very healthy to me either.’

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They are sitting in the sun, but the longer she keeps going on about it, the more of a chill he feels. It starts in his fingers, always in his fingers. Ed clenches his fist and unclenches it, getting some of that blood flowing back into them.

'Maybe not, but it's easy.' She looks at the donut in her hand and puts it down to take one of the glazes ones instead. 'They're good, aren't you hungry?'

'I'll eat something later,' he says, wondering if she's ever experienced anything that wasn't *easy*. 'Have as many as you want.'

Her brows pull together for a moment, creating a delicate little line on her forehead, but then she turns and leans into him, her body familiar and warm, her shoulder a little too sharp to be comfortable. 'You'd tell me if you're getting sick, right? I got stuff planned this weekend. I really can't catch anything now.'

'I'm not,' he says and wonders about her plans. They always meet on Fridays and sometimes he goes over to her place, but he doesn't think her plans include him this time. 'Anything fun?'

She pauses for a moment, still taking small bites from her donut but not looking at him. 'Yeah,' she says at last, and when she doesn't elaborate, he doesn't press her.

It's just as well. He's got some things to take care of.

They sit in silence for a while longer, watching other people running, cycling, or walking their dogs. When the sun has set low enough to tell them the afternoon is fading, they get up and go their separate ways.

He has thought about it, about what she said. He has thought about it many times before and every time the idea of getting away seems like a dream. It is something he has toyed with for years, but he never found the courage to leave. To take that leap. There is something about staying, something about knowing what's happening in the place where you are known. It comforts him, whereas uncertainty doesn't.

Ed paces through his apartment, a small space that looks almost sterile. He has never been a messy man, able to understand the benefits of good organization even when he was younger. But now he cleans anyway, wiping away on spotless surfaces, sorting what is already sorted. There is no perfection. But if there was, he'd be pretty damn close to it.

They're tearing it down to build a grocery store. Ed stands still and looks out into the night, vaguely in the direction of the old house, but he

can't see it from here. *Why now?* He shakes his head and continues cleaning, trying to take his mind off the fence for a bit.

'Just so you know, I was against it.' The old Sergeant slams the bottle a little too hard on the table and Ed looks past him to see if anyone noticed. 'Heard what they were planning to do and just couldn't believe it. It's a crime scene for Pete's sake.'

They're in the town bar, sat in the back near the restrooms where the wall is draped in NFL pennants and other sports memorabilia.

'Just couldn't believe it,' the Sergeant says again, a little worse for the drink and his face a little redder than sunburned. 'They ought to know I was right, they ought to respect it, but they just don't have the time of day for an old coot like me. After all those years, I'm telling you. Not an ounce of gratitude.'

They'd been going out like this for years now, on Saturdays, at least one Saturday every month, although it hadn't always been to that bar. It had been the Sergeant's idea, back when Ed had been just a boy, taking him for ice cream and treating him like he was younger than he had been back then. It had become a tradition—one where he'd never been sure if it had started out of goodwill or with hopes to get him to talk more, but after all those years that hardly seemed to matter.

'They're acting like it's a closed case. Not cold, closed.'

Ed just lets the man talk, has been letting him talk all these years. 'It was bound to happen eventually,' he says after a while. 'It's a sunk cost for them, bound to recover nothing if they don't sell it. Even if they did solve the case, no one cares.' He stops before he says too much. *He* should care. Ed takes a long swig from his lemonade—he doesn't drink around others—and leans back with a sigh.

It had been a long time and still, it was always there with him. Nobody forgot when something like this happened in a small town, and they sure as hell didn't let him forget either. He wasn't a boy anymore, turning thirty-eight in a couple of weeks, but the past still seemed to lurk around every corner. Gone but not forgotten.

'I'm sorry, kid,' the Sergeant says after they shared some silence, the murmur of the other patrons draping over their thoughts like a suffocating blanket. 'I shouldn't be talking like this, not to you anyways. Can't imagine what it's like for you, seeing that old place torn down.' He pauses again, brings the beer up to his face, but it's empty. 'It never sat well with me that we couldn't figure it out, hell, that we couldn't

It Was Bound to Happen Eventually

get close to a lead at all.' He stares down the bottle a little longer, then shakes his head. 'I'm sorry we never found out what happened to your folks.'

Ed forces a sympathetic smile and nods. 'It's alright, I understand.'

It's a difficult thing when people go missing.

'It's not illegal for people to disappear,' the Sergeant had told him before, 'but it's a problem when we can't figure out why.' It had been a problem when both parents had vanished, leaving behind their teenage son. That kind of thing *was* a crime, although Ed hadn't known until later. He had thought about this a lot.

It hadn't made sense to the officers investigating their absence. 'Why would they do that?' they'd asked but found no real answer. It hadn't made sense that they had left no trace, be it physical or on paper, to where they could have gone, no motive, nothing. In the end, it had been the corpus delicti that had put their efforts on ice.

No body no crime. That didn't mean that there couldn't have been a crime, but without evidence, without *anything*, they'd had nothing. So the investigators had tried their best, had talked to him again and again, talked to anyone they could think of. But nothing had ever come of it.

As Ed had told them himself, things hadn't been perfect behind closed doors. His mother drank, his father didn't, and neither of them seemed too happy. Or so he had said. He hadn't told them much more, and the interviews had eventually shifted to ice cream on Saturday afternoons. He'd been a child after all. A child who'd just lost his parents, who'd been left in the care of the state for his last years of adolescence, too old to be adopted, too old for a family, it seemed. He thought that they must have pitied him.

Ed takes the long walk home, straying along the roads of his hometown, roads he knows well but wanders with a subtle sense of unease. It is a feeling that has lasted throughout his life, the feeling that had started back then. *Uncertainty*, he thinks, *if not apprehension*. It is the feeling of an unresolved past that has yet to be buried completely.

All of these things were easier to shrug off in company but walking alone down the streets, he wonders what might hide in the shadows, who he might see, and what they might know.

And now this.

When he gets home, he just sleeps. He does nothing all Sunday and on Monday, just before dawn, he dresses and makes his way down

those streets yet again, past the donut shop without slowing, all the way to the fence.

He watches when the workers arrive, one and then another, forming a small cluster of burly men dressed in bright orange vests and white hardhats. He watches when they fire up the big demolition trucks, loud creatures that fill the fresh morning air with the acrid stench of exhaust, and he stays until the work has started, until the plow has connected to one of the walls and it begins crumbling. Like papier-mâché, like a dollhouse—not a home for a long time.

When the roof begins to cave in, he finally turns and walks further down that same road, past the fence and away. He rounds the corner and waits by the sign until the greyhound shows up and takes him.

He needs to get out for a while.

Pacified by the soft rumble of the engine, he never looks back. Instead, he rides the bus as far as he can, then takes another and makes it across the country. Here is a life where he doesn't know all the streets, where, weighed down by nothing but one carefully packed duffle, he can be what he wasn't back home: a stranger.

After all, it is not a crime for adults to go missing. It happens all the time. And when the next Friday rolls around, he isn't there to read the new headline pinned to the board in the donut shop, the most exciting thing to have happened in town in a long time.

Breaking: Bodies recovered after twenty-three years.

Lucie Vovk



Lucie Vovk is a poet and fiction author from Scotland and France, though she grew up in neither of these countries. She wrote a novel at sixteen and had a very embarrassing email exchange with an editor at Simon & Schuster (present-tense Lucie is very jealous of her confidence). She feels it was fairly inevitable that she got into writing after that.

Lucie takes inspiration from the natural world and folk tales from around the globe. Her poems examine the mind's relationship to the body, growing at the crossroads of different cultures, and twenty-first-century loneliness. She uses her fiction to explore dream worlds where tides can stop in their tracks, the dead can speak, and mountains can stand up and turn cartwheels. She is currently working on her first poetry collection, as well as a group of short stories exploring the intersection of folklore and grief.

🐦 @lucies19plants

Preserves

I write this all in the present tense
because every time I make risotto I am seventeen, hungry,
and she is immortal.

Crowded around the saucepan, like two witches
at the brew, Heather tells me not to stir anti-clockwise
because that's how the devil gets in.

At fourteen she teaches me to love cooked fruit.
She lets me reckon with the yield of it, makes my mouth see
it is witnessing what it feels like to ferment and return to the earth
after summer has had its way with us.

In the penultimate December
she shows me which fruits are in season.
Oranges, lemons, persimmons, all
sharp as a needle on the bed of my tongue.
We make suns of satsumas studded with cloves:
some things can be kept long after they are gone.

It is fitting that she should be named for a flower
as hardy as the thing that killed her.

Far from home

at twenty-two—and three years to the day
since the Friday that we lost her—I am making food for twelve
and overcook four kilos of pasta, which my friends, laughing,
help turn into dough for bread:
time stretches and folds, Heather at my shoulder,
watching us eat.

Poetry

The summer after she died I walked into the sea and
tried to forget how to need breath.

I'm nineteen
and in the passenger seat. Between us hang
the days I have just learned are numbered, in my lap
the box of gingerbread we made that afternoon.
We face forwards to watch the sun running out of wick.
She breaks a biscuit in two, gives me the bigger half, and
I ask her if she is afraid. She turns to look at me, and tells me 'no'.

The party wall

That slice of moon—a quartered orange
sucked dry and thrown
from the window of a passing car—
peers through the dusking room,
a yellow witness to my peeled shoulder,
my clothes pooled on the floor.

Its light curls cold around me as,
next door, the lover shuts the blinds,
reaches for the figure that waits in the lamplight;
they dip into familiar shadows, throwing
formless imaginings against our shared wall.
Their whisper and bite do not stay on their side.

A headlight sails across my room.
It lies down in the middle of the bed.

Deadpoint

After the melting
but before the falling
when the boy
hung weightless
a loosed puppet
eyes wide open
despite the sun
that tried to love him
into blindness
and when he saw
he couldn't find
the line that cut
the sea from sky
then the world became
a marble
and his the hand
that aimed it
winking as it spun
still further
away from him
and he felt the air
shimmer
with the hours
or was it just
the feathers
he was shedding
like a swallow's
first moult
caught in the wax
running down
his little body
as if making
a statue of him already
to remember
his shape before
it flowed
off his toes

and rained
onto the face
of his father
below
then the body
that had been
a son
shattered
as solid things do
on the surface
of the ocean
that holds
the shore
where Daedalus will
for the rest of his days
keep doves in a cage
by the window.

The Buddha at Leshan

One among the many swarming at his feet,
I am carrying my weight in language
and set it down by his ordered toes.

At once my French evaporates and joins
the water hanging in the air. All my *viens voir*,
c'est beau, and *fait chaud*, become just sound
without its sense; they blur
into my neighbour's *zhēnměi*, her *kàn*
nà and *gěi wǒ yī píng shuǐ*.

Our words leave us
to condense in the coils of the Buddha's hair,
to rain down from his earlobes.
I catch a vowel in my mouth:
it tastes of star anise and the gleaming cobbles
of a hometown I've never seen.

The crowd swells and presses in.
All language turns to storm
and beats against the cliff above us,
carving out the shape of him who smiles
to see himself thus created.

The clouds empty themselves over the forest.
A deer raises its head, speaks a single word and flees.
We scramble for our mother tongues
and fit them into our mouths.
I bend to give a woman back
the *míng* she dropped behind her.

viens voir—come and see; *c'est beau*—it's beautiful; *fait chaud*—it's hot;
zhēnměi—it's beautiful; *kàn nà*—look; *gěi wǒ yī píng shuǐ*—bring the
water; *mí*—name

Alienor Bombarde



Alienor Bombarde was born in the UK to a French father and his British wife, shortly before they moved to Japan. After a French Baccalaureate of Science, Alienor returned to the United Kingdom, where she graduated first class from Chinese studies at the University of Manchester, with a year abroad studying at National Taiwan University, Taipei. She decided on a Creative Writing Master's, and has since had fiction and non-fiction published in the Manchester Review, Sphinx Reviews, X-R-A-Y Literary magazine and Literati Magazine, as well as for Fly on the Wall Press during her publishing internship. She is working on a novel about a misfit woman and doesn't believe you should judge a book by its cover.

The Ugly Baby

A, for arseholes. For antenatal, too. I'm sure the two have been confused. After all, they function in a similar way. You go in thinking it's not going to be that bad. You come out damaged, a little ripped up, and wishing there hadn't been so much shit.

A for the ants that scurried on the other side of Mother's open window on Friday evening, when she first got an achy feeling between her hips. She wondered whether the ants were a bad omen and hobbled towards the landline. She rang the hospital..

'I think I'm getting contractions.'

'Could you hold on till Monday? It's bank holiday weekend and the maternity ward is full,' reception said.

They told her to take a nice hot bath and wait it out. I've never been particularly considerate of the proletariat and I couldn't hold on. Mother had to get a taxi to a hospital an hour away. The flat was owned by her friend's Finnish boyfriend. There was no way she was staining the carpet.

Mother regarded my birth as one of the more interesting events of 1987. She once called me from her landline to tell me this. She sounded drunk. What follows is mostly a gabled account of a story she'd told every Christmas since, although I've allowed myself to fill in the gaps. It is my birth, after all.

The labour ward found her a small room and put her on gas and air. The pain dulled and between the punches of contraction she found herself able to think, as if her thoughts formed bubbles of consciousness. She could hear other people through the walls, a tired hum of moans. The midwife lifted the umbilical cord when it got stuck around my neck. The rest of me was out by half past eight.

After being placed on Mother's chest, covered in gunk, I was whisked away for a wipe down and a vitamin K injection. The midwife

dressed me in pink clothes from Mother's overnight bag.

'The placenta is an amazing thing, Annabelle, it's worth having a look at,' the midwife said. At some point, the midwives had changed. The haggard one had finished her night shift and a morning midwife had come in, all perk and pizzazz. Her eyes were bright and her moves swift.

Mother nodded vaguely. A dark bloody thing was being thrust under her nose, while she lay there with her knees up and legs spread. She was not entirely immune to the stink of the night spent. Then the midwife left, and a nurse sat on the edge of her bed. The room was a pale yellow, empty save for the bed and three plastic chairs. Outside, the clouds hung low, feverish. Mother glanced over at the plastic bassinet. There I was. Her daughter: a white blanket and a small grey hand.

A doctor strolled in, the midwife by his side. He was a small man with round glasses and clean-looking skin. They smiled. The doctor peered down at me and cooed. His forehead creased like a used napkin. The midwife nodded. Mother looked over at the colour of the curtains and asked whether anyone had thought about ordering new ones.

The doctor turned his smile from Mother to the curtains and back again. He told her they'd have to run a few tests as standard procedure. Mother thought he was talking about the curtains. How complicated decision-making was in hospitals, she thought. She looked down at her fingernails. She'd had them varnished red on Wednesday. Without really being sure if she was happy or sad, she started to cry.

'Annabelle, I don't want you to worry about anything,' the doctor said.

'I'm not worried,' she gulped.

Mother wished she'd painted her nails pink instead of red. Pink would have looked demure and motherly.

'We're going to make sure everything is alright.'

'Alright.'

A nurse brought her pudding. I was transferred to a Special Care Baby Unit. To the midwife's surprise, all my test results were normal. They put me back in with Mother and exclaimed in singsong voices how sweet I was.

A name had to be chosen for my birth certificate. My mother had wanted to call me something dainty. Like Lily or Daisy. But the ephemeral nature of flowers worried her. She thought of Anne, which

The Ugly Baby

was sturdy, or Joan, but decided on Ruth, because the Ruths she'd known were good, independent women.

Grandma drove down to see me. She struggled to hide her disappointment. She joked I was the runt of the litter, like a puppy left behind. But Grandma was sure I'd be alright. 'She's bound to grow out of all this,' she said, gesturing at me. 'Runts always end up tougher than you think.'

Mother wasn't sure what it was I was supposed to grow out of. Her newborn was everything she'd expected it to be. I weighed six pounds, looked a little like an old man, bit her tits and shat strange substances. The hard part was over, she thought. The baby had been birthed and her life, her real one, could begin.

She allowed herself to be shipped back to Suffolk. Grandma had a house near Aldeburgh, close enough to the sea that from time to time its salty breeze made the leaves tremble in her green thumbled garden. She had bought the house with her late husband, Andrew, whom I never met. The house had dark brown beams running across white ceilings, and a stairway that creaked whenever anyone needed a wee in the middle of the night.

In her childhood bedroom, Mother spent a few more days watching me feed and sleep and open my eyes. Spring sunshine poured through the open windows.

A, like air, a breath fresh of it. The basic principle is to ingest it, convert it. She thought I was a marvel for having understood this, and gazed as my lungs filled and fell, anxious that I might forget what she couldn't understand how I knew. She watched me so closely that it wasn't long before she noticed that the peach fuzz on my skin was white and growing thicker.

She had been washing me in the sink. Patting me dry, she contemplated my soft belly and was tempted to comb it. I was softer and fluffier than the towel she'd just dried me with. Running her fingers over my arms and legs, she noticed the hard knobs of my knees, the lumps on my shoulders. Her palms flattened against the base of my crooked neck.

Calling the hospital, she asked for the doctor with round glasses. Mother explained she was sure I was hairier and my bones seemed to have extra lumps. On his recommendation, she took me back to the hospital. A paediatrician ran scans and took blood. Again, all of my

results were normal.

But then the news got out. The doctor gave the game away, because it was the eighties and the concept of publicity was still attractive for a man's career. I was placed in an incubator for show and tell. Researchers asked if they could take photographs. A doctor, who had a PhD in studies of infancy, left London for three days to come up and have a look at me. He based a research paper on me. Child malformation. Pictures of Ruth H. were splashed across medical journals, which Grandma liked until she read the articles.

When Maureen from the village said to her: 'Annie, there was the funniest looking baby in the papers this morning, and it's got the same surname as you.'

She said: 'Oh, is there? I don't read the newspaper these days, they print the letters too small.'

Maureen told her then, leaning over the fence, that it was a marvel. Grandma said she was sure it was but she had to go to the shops. She went into every newsstand, where she bought every paper with my name on it.

Newspaper sales having gone up, more stories about infant development were printed across the nation. Mother would always say she had read every line written about her daughter. She'd recite that I was an infant with an abnormal integumentary system, my connective tissue disorders seemed concentrated to my pilosity, skin, ligaments and joints. While these would normally have been associated with significant disability and life-threatening complications, I had tested negative for any known dermatosis disease. My white and red blood cell counts were normal, oxygen levels good and I had forty-six chromosomes. I had no trace of bacterial or fungal infection, mineral and vitamin levels deficiency, I had no hypersensitivity and presented no allergies, there was no gland inflammation or irritation.

I was a newborn baby and no one could find anything wrong with me, which suggested that there was nothing wrong with me. *Is this simply the exception that confirms the rule?* one writer asked, in an article entitled "Darwinian progress: no biological explanation for an infant's affliction".

Mother decided she wanted to go back to London at the end of her maternity leave. Before everyone began to publicly compare me to a chimpanzee, Mother had been sharing a flat with a girl she'd met at secretarial college. Nicola had dropped out to become an airline hostess. Onboard, she'd met aristocratic Andreas, an aviator. Mother

had asked Andreas and Nicola whether they'd be my godparents. Neither of them, thank goodness, ever read medical journals.

They came up one Saturday to see the baptism. When they saw me lying in my cot, they took my mother aside. Hovering at the entrance to my Grandma's kitchen, they asked in hushed tones, as if afraid I might hear, what was wrong. Mother offered them eggs and bacon and blamed my ugly useless dad. Andreas and Nicola smiled and asked if she had anyone else in mind for god-parenting.

That afternoon, Nicola told her they were about to move to Finland. Andreas would propose, she said, in a year's time. Nicola offered to help Mother find someone else to share the flat with.

'No one is going to want to share with a baby.'

'I'm going to ask,' Nicola said.

And she did. Amid shopping and packing, Nicola asked her friends, her boyfriend's friends, she asked everyone, whether anyone wanted to rent a shared flat in Greenwich with a young single working mother and funny-looking baby.

When Andreas announced he was willing to sell, a friend called Arnold became interested. He said he would gladly welcome having Mother as a renter.

'You remember Arnold.' Nicola smiled through the phone.

'Beggars can't be choosers,' Mother said grimly. She thought Arnold was a bit of a simp. She heard Nicola laugh on the other end.

'You could always move somewhere else?'

But Annabelle didn't want to move somewhere else. After that, she telephoned Arnold and asked what the rent would be. He gave her a discounted rate and Mother was delighted. She booked me in for daycare and bought a new suit for her imminent return to the working world.

Arnold fancied himself a luckless actor and that was as close as he ever got to having a line of work. It was always in his destiny to fail, he used to say. Arnold openly admitted he was too arrogant to attend any auditions, unless he heard Mark Rylance was being considered for the part. He spent most of his days wandering through the park and drinking coffee out of tiny cups.

Arnold had read History at Homerton College, Cambridge. He had done so with no intention of finding any kind of employment thereafter. Homerton had just been a natural progression from boarding school. Once his older brother graduated, Arnold stopped attending

lectures and spent a majority of his time down in London. Arnold had entertained theatre crowds in his brother's flat with superfluously large amounts of champagne and vodka. There, a stranger to sobriety, he'd been promised countless roles by RADA graduates in exchange for favours. The favours were always given, for Arnold was generous to a fault. His parents hadn't minded his lack of graduation—he had got into Cambridge, which was all that mattered. They were happy to extend their holiday in Switzerland.

When he bought the flat from Andreas, it had been twenty years since he'd failed to graduate. He wasn't really into property, but for appearance's sake, he thought it would look good to be interested in something other than himself. Besides, he'd been assured by someone somewhere, he had forgotten who, that property value would go up in the Greenwich area. Besides, he was curious about the infamously ugly baby.

Mother soon found out she hated her job, not because she minded being a secretary—that part she liked—but because her boss had so obviously hoped she wouldn't come back. Several evenings a week, she burst into tears from exhaustion. Arnold offered her wine and petted me, before going on long weekends in the Alps and the Lake District.

Otherwise, the two of them amiably minded their own businesses—and me. Things got better, the way they did in the nineties for the right people in the right place at the right time. Mother was promoted at the bank, which meant she started coming home late. Once the boss who didn't like her was out of the picture, she was barely ever home, and always blamed the commute. Arnold began to pick me up from daycare. Most days, he bought me a chocolate bar or an ice cream.

Weekdays flew by, I doubled in size and remained a little ball of fur with an old man's face. Saturdays and Sundays were spent strolling through the park, taking turns to wheel the pushchair. We would usually head to a bakery, though once there, I doubt Arnold touched anything except espresso. Mother guzzled back litres of anything frothy and eyed up the other couples and their children.

'They're all looking at her,' she once said to Arnold.

'What?'

'They know she's special.'

But soon they learnt to take the stares for granted. It would have seemed odd if I had gone a day without it.

It was Arnold who kept mirrors away from me. He hid the one in the bathroom under newspapers and magazine pictures of ladies with no clothes on. He told my mother that mirrors in bathrooms were both awfully bourgeois and terribly lower-class—neither of which my mother wanted to be. She laughed at him, but kept mirrors out of my reach, too.

When the daycare centre made comments about how much hair I shed, Arnold suggested I stop going. He promised he would keep me company. Mother called up one of her friends for an objective opinion. The friend was a school teacher. The school teacher was invited to tea. She had very curly, coiled hair and a dress covered with purple and orange flowers. She is one of my earliest memories.

She buttered a crumpet for me and said to Arnold and Annabelle: ‘She’s so much smaller than the other children, I’m afraid they’d trample her.’

Arnold gave her the rest of the Victoria Sponge, which he had bought specially for the occasion. Annabelle said she seemed to be better at managing other people’s money than managing me. She got another promotion at work.

Thinking back to my early memories, I don’t remember ever being particularly worried about mirrors or lack thereof. There were many interesting things to look at. Traffic lights, dogs, people’s coats. My mother fussed over her appearance in private, so it never occurred to me to fuss over mine. Arnold only emerged from his room as Arnold. He was not required to fabricate a daily persona.

Arnold was relaxed in his care-taking duties. He read plays and smoked a pipe, and stuck me in front of soap operas. He bought the block letters of the alphabet but never actually bothered to teach me their order. I learnt the most through watching the people inside the television. I noticed they all looked the same. The women had pale unblemished and hairless skin and wore similar clothes. The men had straight noses and square foreheads and short hair. I also realised that everyone seemed to pair off. Most men were talking about girls, and most women were talking about men. After two people in the box got married, I asked Arnold why he wasn’t. He told me he had never met the right woman.

We were eating shepherd’s pie, which Arnold had bought from a corner shop. My mother told me I shouldn’t bother Arnold with such trivial matters. I asked who my father was. My mother drank more wine.

This exchange led Arnold to believe I was an exceptionally bright child. Which I was, since I'd only just turned three. He began to sit down with me and gossip for hours. Arnold was a ruthless gossip. He said Annabelle had met a man when she was twenty-five.

My father was eight years older than her and a stockbroker. He took her on weekends away in Kent and Dorset. He was bald, and Arnold had never seen him without a pair of sunglasses. They had broken it off shortly before Annabelle found out she was pregnant. When she told my father she was expecting, he asked her how she could be sure it was his.

So you see, this chapter was only ever about arseholes after all.

Melanie Johnson



Melanie Johnson is a Northern woman inspired by Victoria Wood and Alan Bennett. A fiction writer of short stories and monologues, she studied at City Lit in London before joining the London Writers' Elective. Melanie has taken time away from being a barrister who represented parents and children in Children Act proceedings. She is currently working on a novel exploring relationships within a dysfunctional family where the women lack agency. Melanie is influenced by local spoken word. She has read at literary events held at Waterstones and Cu'irt International Festival of Literature in Galway in 2017.

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'Speaking from Experience'

Three Monologues

The Last Word

Hello, love, it's your mother. Awful I can't see your lovely face. What can we do? I've been ever so anxious. A nurse suggested a video. Told me I don't look as bad as I think. They've been fabulous, I do hope they get a pay rise after all this. I worry about you and I'm worried sick about your dad. After I'm gone, it'll be on you to deal with him. And he's such a royal pain in the bum. No wonder that's where the cancer got me. The heart of a lion, but God he always has to have the last word. Although, after a couple of days he'll do his best to make amends.

I swear he got worse after he retired. Told me his first project was the garden. Cheeky beggar. I said, 'Leave well alone.' It took me ten years to work out what grew best and where. We had a right shouting match about perennials.

He said, 'I know what perennial means.'

I should've known better thinking that were the end of it. After that lovely yoga weekend we had, I got back feeling all zen. You might remember my borders looked like he'd been at them with a rotavator. That mad I took a hammer, I wanted to smash his shed in. We sorted it. That new greenhouse he built me is the envy of the estate.

With all that's going on, I thought he'd be the death of me. First off, I thought it were a storm in a tea-cup. He of course got his knickers in a twist whilst it were still in China. I told him to shut up. I knew he was on the internet at night, reading science journals and the like. Working himself up. When he said he was going to sleep in Tom's room, I clicked. He were worried about me.

Not long ago, do you remember? I suggested single beds. Oh, he was that upset. As if I'd said I was sailing off with Ralph Dixon, on that round the world cruise. He never did like Ralph. Said he were too

touchy-feely with women and what with the cricket club scandal. Your dad swore Ralph helped himself to the tour funds. Well, if he did, he’s paid for it now. Sat in a windowless cabin outside San Francisco, too mean to pay for a balcony. You know how much I love your dad. He didn’t get it—I needed my own bed. How could I cuddle up to him with a bag of poo attached to my tummy? And there’s no controlling the wind.

I was at a loss. Why not use the guest room? After the work he put in with the ensuite. I popped in with the Hoover. Ridiculous—full of loo rolls, tinned tomatoes, beans, Fray Bentos pies and pasta. He hates pasta. Worse than when your granny died. You can’t have forgotten? We were eating Fray Bentos for nigh on two years. That woman never got over rationing. Tom got fed up, said they tasted like Pedigree Chum.

The poor dog is traumatised, she’s copped for his madness. I could smell TCP a mile away. I asked him, ‘What on earth are you doing?’ She was stood forlorn and dripping. He had my lady-shave in his hand, great clump of fur missing from her backside. Said he was unsure about the data, could her fur carry the virus? I had the screaming ab dabs. Then he came up with another idea. A dog coat, then wash her feet in vodka when he got home. He had a job finding a dog coat. Who in their right mind puts a coat on a Bernese Mountain dog?

Like that’s not bad enough, he near got arrested on his way to Proud Poochies. That new shop on Harbour Road. Enthusiastic copper from Leeds. ‘Was it an essential journey?’ Asked for his ID. Of course, that released the libertarian, or contrarian, take your pick. Your dad only gave the edited highlights. You can guess how it went down!

Did the officer know age isn’t the only factor?

Told him, he’s as strong as an ox—well certainly stubborn as one.

Don’t trust the government.

Does he know what a disgrace Boris is?

Did he know about the Bullingdon Club?—That copper knows now, named after a prison near Oxford.

Boris and his mates should’ve been arrested for criminal damage.

He says one thing does another. Your dad’s now made his own fake ID, as if that copper isn’t going to remember him? Made one for Janice in the book club.

Janice said to me, ‘I think my wrinkles will give the game away. No chance of Botox with lockdown.’ I suggested Polyfiller. Anyway, when the copper rang his sergeant, turns out to be Danny, that lad from Scarborough Road, always had a crush on you. That was the end of the

matter. So, I am still the only one in the family with a criminal record.

No problem sourcing the vodka. Every time Tom and Marek came back from Poland, they brought bottles of the stuff. Your dad, too soft to say, he didn't drink it. Marek, he calls now and again. A lovely lad, the heart of him, caring for Tom at the end. I've had to water the vodka down. Licking her paws made her wobbly. She fell, broke that God awful China dog your granny bought us.

Just as well you haven't seen your dad in his outdoor kit. He was digging round in the garage till he found them oilskins. Bright orange. Do you remember? He bought them for that trip to the Norfolk Broads. As if we'd be battling force tens, not chugging at five miles an hour! He does look a right bonny bugger in his gear. He took the cup out of my sports bra for over his nose and mouth. Never asked me, put the bra back in my underwear drawer. Then he has a welder's mask, to top it off he's got one of them beekeeper hats with netting all over.

Janice said he'd made it onto Bridlington Grumpies Facebook. 'Most protected man in Yorkshire' makes a change. Usually, it's pictures of people who haven't parked properly. I parked in the disabled bay outside Tesco. Some moron posted, 'Retired teacher should know better.' I was tempted to post a picture of my colostomy bag—full.

Anyway, love. I want you to know how much I love you. I've sorted out as much as I can. I've opted for a humanist service. None of that God squad rubbish. Marx wasn't wrong. The morphine I get knocks all sense out of me.

I've picked my music. 'Revolution' on the way in, the Esher demos off the *White* album, beautiful harmonies. A bit of Bach for the oven. I thought for the way out, 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life'. Funny but flippant. I've settled on Nina Simone, 'Feeling Good'. One of your dad's favourites.

As you know, I'm not having Auntie Rosemarie at the funeral. I've never got over her saying, 'Tom's sins will be forgiven at the gates of heaven.' Stupid cow told me I was a bad mother. Still can't believe she said Tom was gay because I'd taken you both to Greenham Common. Don't be surprised, I have left her a little something in the Will, a stunning silk scarf, rainbow. I wore it at Gay Pride.

I've signed a DNR. My chest won't cope with bashing. I've said don't bother with a ventilator, others need it. You can imagine, when your father heard about the shortage, he was in that shed. Set about with his plans of making one. For all his faults that man is a genius. Way smarter than James Dyson. As if we haven't got enough hairdryers? At

least your dad put his talents to good use.

Now they've moved me to the ground floor, at least I get to see your dad through the window. He frightened the living daylight out of the night staff putting a ladder up.

My love, I can't bear to leave you both. Sorry I should have told you before I ended up in here. It happened so quick. Your dad suspected secondaries, cancer in my bum was bad enough. Well, in my liver and just about everywhere else now.

I love you so much. Promise me—this is serious—you absolutely must get yourself checked out. I don't mean once in a blue moon.

Tom, then me.

I am so proud of you, female engineer and PhD to boot. You've always had your father's brains. I do hope you have his genes.

Pink

Dumped. Finished. Terminated. Not sure which word suits. Nobody had the grace to inform me. I heard it on the news. Journalists lurk outside so I can't leave the house. How triumphant my many critics must feel.

New models had been arriving, thick and fast. Believe you me, thick is the operative word. I've seen one with a protruding tummy. Ordinarily, I'd embrace the diversity of shape, sizes and colour, but not when they all have the cheek to use my name.

Don't get me wrong. I'm used to competition. I battled it out with Sindy for years. The firm insisted I apply for an injunction in 1989. We settled in the end. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. The thing is, I liked her. She had her struggles, going under the knife for a breast reduction. She had so much work done she looks fourteen. She's actually fifty-eight. Poor love wasn't even blessed with good hair, one cut and it turned to frizz.

I've had a little work done. Who hasn't at my age? The most difficult thing has been maintaining my eighteen-inch waist. No carbohydrate has ever passed my lips, yet the stupid publicity department regularly had me posing with pink cupcakes supposedly cooked in my pink cooker. Ridiculous, my culinary skills are non-existent.

There are advantages to a slim figure. I have some fabulous pieces in my wardrobe, Vera Wang, Calvin Klein. I don't have a say in what I wear, I did complain. I asked them, 'Who wants to wear a tutu at my

age?’

Later models were astronauts, doctors, even a boxer. They didn’t have to say, ‘Math class is tough’, or ‘I love shopping’, in a weird American accent. I am German, although I have made my home in ‘God’s own county’—Yorkshire.

The humiliations have been relentless. Take Tom Forsythe for instance. He had the nerve to call himself an artist. He produced a series of photographs ‘Food Chain Barbie’s’. He depicted me in a food blender. Not even a Kenwood. The legal department sorted him out.

My image, tall, slim and feminine, was rigorously protected. Some fool in PR decided I should have a boyfriend because God forbid anyone should think I’m a lesbian. But they could have done better than design Ken, with his Farrah slacks and awful hair. I heard he’s had a makeover and they gave him a dad tummy. I suspect that won’t improve his personality. He’s squarer than an OXO cube. I’m not his type. At least they never found out about my shenanigans with Action Man, oh those gripping hands. We had a roll in the hay. It was only a roll. Imagine my disappointment when I discovered he has no tackle.

Feminists have been foul about me. The ones with hairy armpits and comfortable shoes had a lot to say. I used to think it was envy of my iconic status. Andy Warhol painted my portrait. I have it on good authority that I narrowly missed out on an Oscar nomination for the first *Toy Story*.

Lately, I’ve been thinking feminists may have a point. My seminal work was published ‘How to Lose Weight’. The principal advice, ‘don’t eat’. What was I thinking? Encouraging young girls to become anorexic.

All these years I’ve lived in a pink, migraine-inducing house. No more, Action Man is smuggling in paint, neutral shades, Farrow and Ball of course. The swivel of his eagle eyes ever so useful.

Avoiding public appearances has given me a chance to read, Shakespeare, would you believe? I’m not sure about *Hamlet*. Boy, does he feel sorry for himself. Ophelia, another woman shafted. Polonius waffled on a bit, but he did offer one piece of good advice.

‘This above all: to thine own self be true.’

So, there it is, decision made. I have my letter in hand.

Jog on Mattel.

I am off to university.

Barbie x

The Change

‘Women should masturbate twice a week.’

I sprayed tea over my newly decorated walls. Radio Four? Menopause advice? Better late than never!

Nobody talked about ‘Women’s Things’ in the seventies, least not in Filey.

Miss Bridson taught science from a textbook, aptly named ‘modern biology’, so modern it had a picture of a turtle on the front. I was none the wiser. The diagram of the penis looked nothing like that picture on the bus shelter declaring Bazza was a dickhead. The uterus reminded me of the tree fern Auntie Joan tried to grow when she returned from her exotic holiday to Bournemouth.

Girls need to know, buy chocolate and Nurofen to ease period pains.

It was all too shameful. Greasy lads with lanky hair smelling of Hi Karate and sweat shouted, ‘she’s on the rag’ when I missed swimming. Nobody used tampons, they took away your virginity.

It was easier to buy twenty Benson and Hedges than get sanitary products. Only available at the chemist. God forbid anything should happen Wednesday afternoon, when it was half day closing. Embarrassed, I’d wait outside the chemist until it was empty. In a town full of pensioners, it could be hours just for a packet of teenage pampers. I was mortified when a classmate got a job at Whitfields, one of the two chemists in town. I casually looked at cosmetics, before going to the counter with my heather shimmer lipstick and a bulky bag of pads. It never occurred to me, she had periods. Pads meant no jeans, one week in four, luckily long gypsy skirts were in fashion for a while. Trauma when we moved onto two-tone mod skirts.

My ignorance extended to the other end of this biological roller coaster. I thought HRT was Husband Replacement Therapy. ‘Can I have one that can fix things and not hide in the bedroom when the RAC man shows up to change a tyre?’

Hot flushes may sound innocuous, but how the intensity increases. Travelling to work on the Northern line is rubbish. With sweat pouring down my face, no internal thermostat, I thought I would explode. Imagine the carnage, a middle-aged woman splattered on the commuters, who failed to see me impersonating a large purple root vegetable.

Sometimes there were furtive glances, people checked was I ‘on

something'; or they'd move seats thinking I had a tropical disease.

I had to stop wearing eye makeup after I arrived at work looking like Alice Cooper. I was in the ladies, mopping up my mascara mess when a youngster walked in. The sort to think thirty is really old and Kim Kardashian is normal. Her face had more contours than the Brecon Beacons. I tried to explain why I had my head under the hand dryer and there was a wad of wet bog roll stuck on the back of my neck.

'Why don't you use waterproof mascara,' she squeaked.

I cursed her, one thousand hours of period pains.

I consulted Dr Google, so much more to look forward to.

My mantra 'forget my head if it was loose' didn't go far enough. I found myself trying to put the kettle in the fridge. I'd be in and out of a room a dozen times before I remembered why I had gone in there.

There should be special parking bays at supermarkets for women of a certain age. You may have seen them muttering 'I'm sure I put it here.' Sage is meant to help if you remember to take it. I bought a book, 'The Organized Mind'. I carried it in my bag for weeks, hoping that by some process of osmosis the wisdom would seep into my brain. Don't ask me where it is now.

Mood swings are the original rock and roll. Anyone who dared to enter the kitchen believed the tiles had turned into eggshells. Everything was a catastrophe, overcooked pasta, undercooked rice. The result, tears that made Niagara falls look insignificant. I self-medicated with wine, cakes, Marlboro Lights. Hundreds if not thousands have been saved from near death because 'I'm just nipping out for a cig'.

I went to see the 12-year-old GP. He advised me, 'Try a good walk, HRT will give you breast cancer or a heart attack.'

My friends, all on the right side of fifty are now obsessed with alternative remedies. Five of us round the kitchen table for dinner. 'Are you hot?' Back door open, back door closed. The man in the house popped his head in; he heard the words vaginal dryness. He soon disappeared.

Black Cohosh, Red Clover, Ginseng; Holland and Barrett have made a fortune. I wasn't keen on Male Yak cream. There are specialist clinics at a reasonable price! The equivalent of a second mortgage. What have I learnt?

When a woman in your life says, 'I'm just going for a nap.'

Make sure you knock, before walking into the room.

Joseph Coffey



Joseph Coffey started writing at the University of Maastricht as part of his year abroad study offered by the University of Kent. Against the best advice of his history tutors, Joseph opted to follow the passion he found there into the MA at Manchester. After completing his BA in History, Joseph returned home to London, working multiple jobs to save for the MA.

His writing aims to reflect his experiences living and working in London. He has an interest in liminal space, pockets of nature that hang on amid relentless change, and the people who make their lives in and around these spaces. He is interested in the contradictions of the suburbs and the characters these environments produce. As the world opens up, Joseph is looking forward to exploring further afield—always with a keen eye for the overlooked and a notebook in his pocket.

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Aileen and I

Rising from the treeline at the bottom of the gently sloping allotments stand the bare skeletons of four new flat developments. From Aileen's plot, we can see the men scurrying across the rooftop in their fluorescent orange jackets. We listen to the incessant drilling and banging and crashing of construction, peppered by the workers' occasional shouts above the noise. I ask Aileen what she thinks about the flats going up. She regards them from her chair beneath the apple tree, clutching a mug of tea, its steam coiling up from her gloved hands.

'The noise is bad now, aye,' she says, 'but once they are up, that'll stop. We'll get used to it. You used to get a lovely view of the sunset over that way, I'll miss that, but everyone needs somewhere to live.'

The allotments are bounded on three sides by trees cut into Walthamstow Forest, on land owned by the Corporation of London. After scrolling through old maps online, I found evidence of the allotments as early as the 1850s, a square splodge of land marked out poetically from the Forest by the Victorians as '*spade husbandry*'. A charity now runs the allotments: Aileen is a member of the board. This comes with some added benefits. She can park her car at the gate instead of down the bottom of the access road. A blind eye is turned to her evening barbeques, and while she works, there is a steady stream of friendly interruptions, questions, updates, and gifts of potatoes or turnips.

Despite the noise of construction, the sound of wild nature is all around. In perfect Beatrix Potter style, a robin watches us from her perch on a rusting garden fork next to a decaying tool shed. She sings valiantly, fiery red against the dull winter palette, and waits for us to turn over the earth for her so she can feast on the worms.

Aileen has rented her allotment for nearly twenty years now. On her strip of earth, she grows all manner of berries and vegetables,

pumpkins, courgettes, runner beans, sweet peas, raspberries, gooseberries, blackcurrants, onions, potatoes; I could go on. What is more surprising are the sections of the plot yet to be cultivated. The plot is a patchwork of soil and tarpaulin, intersected with ramshackle borders of wood and stepping stones, brick, or concrete. Metal poles stick out of the ground, disused scaffolding for running grapevines or stabilising fruit trees. Many are topped with plastic bottles. Aileen tells me this is to stop the poles from ripping a rusty wound in your flesh or piercing an eye if you were to slip on the mud.

‘I’ve been coming up every day these past few weeks,’ she says, ‘but it takes a lot of work to fight back the weeds and get it all under control. So I appreciate your help, love.’

‘No problem,’ I say. ‘It’s good to be out working again.’

She points out some progress she has made since I was last up, and from around a rampant stand of invasive bamboo, a fox with plumped-up red winter fur emerges and heads straight for us.

‘She’s come for her breakfast,’ Aileen laughs. She stands up, walks over to her shed, and fills a bowl with dog biscuit, setting it down in the grass. The fox approaches warily and then proceeds to crunch its way through the biscuit.

‘I’m sure she’s the same pup that I found orphaned here about four years back,’ Aileen says. ‘See that scratch above her eye?’

The fox is close enough for us to see a hairless white strip of welted flesh just above her eye.

‘She’s very tame,’ I say.

‘Aye, she’s handy to have round, eats all the mice out from under the shed!’

We linger and watch the fox eat, the wind ruffling her coat, her eyes constantly flashing up towards us, ready to bolt at the slightest hint of danger.

‘Right, come on then!’ Aileen pulls me away. After all, I have come here to work.

Aileen is a gardener by trade as well as by passion. She runs her own business from her little silver Ford Focus, which, once the seats are down, serves as a van carrying all her tools and a multitude of hitchhiking spiders. I have known Aileen most of my life, and I remember her waiting in the school playground at home time, long black hair, arms heavy with book bags, corralling her twin girls, Mía and Jody. My parents chatted with her on the walk home (my dad having a particular affinity with her at the school gates as a fellow Scot; *You*

must remember to call her Ay-leen, not I-leen!'). We became colleagues and friends in the summer of 2018. She had just been diagnosed with breast cancer and needed someone to help her work. I had just graduated from university and needed to get myself out of a two-thousand-pound overdraft.

Aileen hands me a fork and talks me through her plans for the day. The fruit cage is overrun with bramble, like a sticky explosion of twisting limbs and thorns, so dense that a darkness lurks deep within. It has burst through the cage and swallowed up the gooseberry bushes, suffocating them of light. If left until the spring it will likely double in size. We are going to have to clear that first.

'And by we love, I mean you!' She nudges my arm, and I nod with a grim smile. Brambles were always my job. Tough bastards. Their thorns could sometimes be as large as a two-pence piece, and their roots anchored themselves into the earth as if made of iron. It had been hot that summer, very hot, and the sweat stung the scratches that riddled my forearms. Today it's easier, the ground is softer, soaked with snowmelt, and the brambles come up with relatively little effort. But still, my hands and forearms ache. The muscle I built that summer atrophied as soon as I stopped working and began a 'proper job' recruiting recruiters for a recruitment company that recruited recruiters into recruitment.

To make sure we have got as many of the roots out as possible (you always miss some), we have to move the twenty or so concrete slabs that form a rough path through the thicket, some of which look suspiciously like the slabs you find at traffic lights with the raised bumps for the blind. Aileen heaves the slabs from the mud and passes them to me to store for later. I had always been astonished at Aileen's strength and stamina. We would work for eight hours a day, hard physical work, often in thirty-three-degree heat or in rain so hard it stung. Even when her chemotherapy started and her hair fell out, and her fingernails turned black, she would always be busy. Trimming hedges, deadheading flowers, or bent double like a yogi weeding flower beds.

It takes about two hours to clear all the brambles. By this time, the ground of the fruit cage has turned into a mire. The metre or so deep holes dug to get to the very deepest of the roots have become trenches that you could lose a boot in. Aileen calls a tea break, and we tramp back to the shed and sit down on the garden table. The wind picks up, and a flurry of snow begins to drive horizontally across the dormant plots' greys and browns.

Aileen offers me a cigarette, and I accept gladly, for old times' sake. 'Don't tell your mum!' I laugh; that's what she always used to say.

'I'm meant to be giving up,' Aileen says. 'They used to come round and measure the carbon monoxide levels in my blood, but since Covid, all I get is a phone call. Easy enough to just say on the phone that I'm not smoking. Ha!'

Aileen had always been cavalier with her smoking. Once she had lost her hair and donned the chemo cap, she enjoyed herself by yelling, 'It's breast cancer!' at passers-by, who had looked at her with a mixture of shock and disdain after noticing the fag smouldering between her fingers. Despite her light-hearted attitude, that summer had been the scariest of Aileen's life. She kept working because she had to. She would have had no other means of income. But I feel her determination through that summer was in part down to a refusal to concede. She dealt with that cancer like a patch of brambles.

We watch the snow fall across the allotments. It melts as soon as it hits the ground. Aileen reels off other things that need sorting on the plot before returning to her clients' gardens in the spring.

'A lot of weeding...' she begins.

'There's always weeding,' I laugh.

'Don't laugh! That's my bread and butter.'

The pond has become overgrown and shallow and needs a good clear-out. She wants to add a new layer of shingle to the paths that skirt the raised beds. But the job she tells me about with the most glee is her plan to build a treehouse in the apple tree. Her daughter is six months pregnant, and Aileen is dreaming of summer evenings years from now, with beers around the barbeque and children in the trees. It's good to see her looking forward to the future. During that summer, the future was not guaranteed and came one appointment at a time.

It's too cold to sit down for long, so we return to the fruit cage. The cage is comprised of five sections of temporary fencing, the kind found at the perimeters of construction sites. I ask her where she got them from.

'Oh aye, I don't remember. Probably Paul got them off the back of a lorry.' Paul is Aileen's ex-partner. A part-time dustman, part-time dealer, who sourced illegal fireworks for the annual allotment bonfire. Once Aileen had got her diagnosis, she chucked him.

'He was always pretty useless, but I couldn't put up with it anymore. I needed him to be strong for me, and he just fell apart. He still comes round to walk the boys every now and then, though.' The

boys are Aileen's two Jack Russells, Angus and Freddie.

We measure some lining and cut it into shape before laying it across the cleared earth and hauling the slabs back into place. Next, Aileen wants to make a border out of wood which will run along the perimeter and around the slabs to neaten things off. We walk back to the shed, and she produces a portable joiner's workbench from the dusty clutter. The shed needs organising too, another job for the ever-growing list.

'I found this on the road outside the work they're doing over there.' She nods towards the building site. 'Left it for a few days to see if anyone came back for it, but after a while, I thought I'd take it myself.'

I cut the wood to size for her while she steadies the other end. The sawing is satisfying; each clunk of the wood hitting the ground produces a little burst of serotonin, a rush of achievement. That's a job done; a thing created. That is what I loved most about working with Aileen. I had found no work before or since that was as fulfilling. The process is beautifully straightforward. You turn up; a job needs doing, a fence painted, a garden cleared, a tree pruned, or a flowerbed weeded. You work at it, enjoying a stream of endorphins from the physical action, free to take breaks on the lawn, watch the birds, sunbathe a little, or listen to music. Once the job is finished, you can see an actual tangible change in the quality of the environment. The garden looks tidier, more inviting, more beautiful. When you add in the reactions of the grateful customers, the work is incredibly rewarding. Once Aileen began leaving me on my own to have her treatment, I'd spend all day outside, alone, yes, but busy and engaged. The solitude was another bonus, and I realised how strange it must have been for Aileen to take an apprentice into her peaceful green world. How lucky I was.

Those are the good days when the sun is warm and not too hot, and the jobs are long but not too hard. On the bad days, when you have the weather to contend with, it can be tiring, freezing, or boiling. But you never suffer from insomnia, anxious late nights worrying over the formatting of emails, or looming quarterly reviews. No boss is screaming at you. No stream of banal emails. No packed commute. No targets to be met or missed. Just what you can do honestly, with your own strength and your own will. You go between the private gardens of your clients, each like hidden worlds of their own, a slight thrill of trespass, or privilege, to see behind the uniform facades of the anonymised suburbs, a window into people's lives, which you have a

hand in shaping.

Aileen holds the stakes into position while I hammer them down. My hands are numb with cold, but the stakes sink into the earth easily enough. The thwack of the hammer echoes across the allotments. By the time all the stakes are in, I can feel sweat beneath my layers of thermal clothes. We stand back to admire our progress.

‘It’s already looking so much better, love, thank you.’

‘It does, much nicer. We should’ve taken some photos at the start.’

‘Aye, always forget that bit.’

‘You’re too keen to get going.’

Next, we cut holes in the lining to plant the new fruit bushes. Aileen has bought four spindly blackcurrant bushes that we place into the earth and cover with manure and compost mulch. The soil we put around the base of the bushes is dark and rich, stark against the slight grey of the earth we have just removed to make the holes. The smell is heady and sweet, and it squelches pleasurably between my gloved fingers. It writhes with worms, a testament to the quality of the compost. Next, we take two wheelie bins up to the entrance of the allotments. Outside, Aileen has had a large pile of woodchip delivered. We shovel the woodchip into the bins and, once Aileen has determined which one is the heaviest and gifted it to me, haul them back down to the cage, scattering it across the lining.

I’m glad the snow has dampened the woodchip. That summer, we were doing similar work at a block of flats with a large and unruly garden. The woodchip had become dry in the heat of the sun, and when we had used it to neaten the borders, dust and fungal spores billowed out with every thrust of our shovels. I took off my shirt and tied it around my face, not that it helped much. Dust was ubiquitous. I will always harbour an enduring hatred for ivy. People foolishly use it to decorate garden walls, but what they forget is that it is a tree, and eventually, it crumbles bricks to dust. Gardening was not a glamorous job, and the water would turn brown when I showered at the end of the day, but that too was oddly satisfying.

We smooth down the mounds of woodchip across the membrane. I fill in any gaps on my hands and knees and then stand to smooth it over once more with my foot. Aileen takes a step back, hands-on-hips.

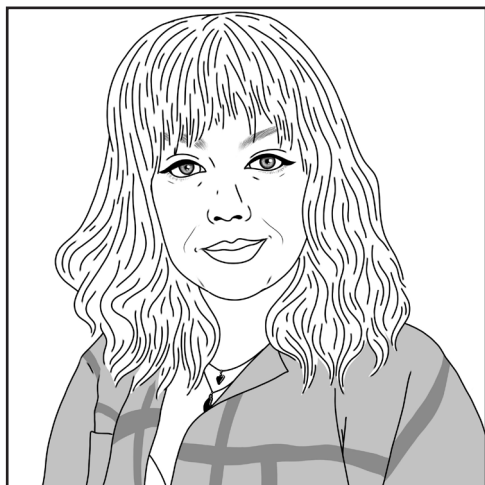
‘There! Job done.’

The fruit cage is unrecognisable. Neat and ordered and ready to provide fruit for years to come. We stand for a while to admire our work. The snow has stopped falling. My waterproof trousers are muddy

up to my knees. I've worked up a hunger for something heavy and greasy, like fish and chips or a battered sausage. I think about the work that I need to get done, incomplete submissions that wait for me back home, the glare of the screen, and the pain in my back from sitting down for too long. I much prefer the ache in my hands, the ache in my arms and legs after being in the fresh air all day. Aileen reads my mind.

'Have you got a few more hours, love? I'd like to tackle that bamboo.'

Ruby Martin



Ruby Martin is a writer, journalist and performer from Cornwall now currently based in Manchester. She was selected for Penguin's WriteNow programme, has performed at the Edinburgh Fringe and was a Streetcake Magazine Experimental Prizewinner in 2019.

She writes both fiction and non-fiction and is currently working on her first novel, a metafictional satire on class and celebrity culture, as well as putting together a short story collection and a compilation of food-themed essays. Her fiction ranges from the weird and tragic to the funny and light-hearted and in general, she is interested in exploring how humour and form can be played with to explore more complicated and darker subjects.

The Minute Before Sleep and *Window Shopping* are stories from the short story collection *The Second Lives of Losers*.

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The Second Lives of Losers

The Minute Before Sleep

In the minute before sleep, the words in my head took me down an unfamiliar street. I had been remembering the previous day when my thoughts meandered down to an unknown shopfront. I don't know what it sold but you were there. You were wearing a postbox-red coat, standing alone, as though you needed somewhere to go.

Before you left, you turned to me, your face still lost.

'Sorry, just passing through!'

I didn't see you again for a couple of months. I was languishing on my couch, stuck there by the summer heat. It was late afternoon. Post-lunch fatigue weighed on my eyelids as the TV flickered in the background. The channels blurred into visions of holidays past, yet there you were, lounging on a beach somewhere. This time, your cheeks were rosy.

'You've caught the sun,' I slurred.

You looked at the blue sky behind you and back to the open book perched on your chest. Your eyes widened.

'Oh shit!' And then you went, and the darkness followed.

It was not until the next day that I realised I recognised the beach. Coral Bay. It was only thirty minutes' drive away and I had always been meaning to visit. The next time there was a sunny weekend, I arranged to meet friends there.

I cycled down an hour early. Not sure why. I didn't expect anyone I knew to be there yet but still, I looked around. Settling down, I plunged my feet off the end of my towel into the warm sand. Opening my book, I let the sand sift slowly between my toes. The heat combined with long, prosaic sentences soon sent me to sleep.

The Second Lives of Losers

'We've swapped places,' you said, looming over me. I was aware I was no longer on a beach; instead, a new grey skyline surrounded both of us. The bathing suit felt very small under scrutiny.

'Not really.' I avoided eye contact and looked at the surroundings. Faceless concrete buildings stood just out of focus. I felt like I knew it, but I couldn't put my finger on it. It had a small garden just like my block of flats, except it was full of strange flowers and sculptures that swayed to a non-existent breeze. This didn't look like my home at all.

'Don't catch the sun now!' You cried out.

I wanted to reassure you, but you were gone.

It was a few months before we spoke again. The whoosh in the trees outside had just turned into a newfound sea, and there you were, your head bobbing along in this shapeshifting ocean.

'What do you reckon this means?'

You looked at me blankly.

'This?' You nodded your head towards the water. 'I'm just hoping it means I haven't pissed myself.' I laughed, which rang out surprisingly clear in the otherwise muted landscape.

'I meant us meeting like this.'

'How do you know I'm real?'

'I guess I don't.' I wiggled my toes, which were starting to become tentacles. 'But I'm glad that if you're not, my subconscious has such a sense of humour.' You chuckled at this, your laughter dissolving into the seafoam. You were gone again, but I knew you would be back.

From then on, you started to appear in my dreams quite often. We didn't always talk but I would feel you there. Often in the background, you would be someone passing by. Behind me in a shop. Sometimes there, trapped between light and a crinkle in the duvet.

I felt it even more when you were not there. Often I could feel you had been there previously, a small hole which sewed itself back up just as I felt for it. I would often wake up, thumbing the seams of my pyjamas.

Previously known as the person who needed three coffees just to look alive, comments about my visible lack of fatigue at the office had started to come in. Despite still undertaking the awful, sweaty forty-minute bike ride, I looked "refreshed" and "glowy". I insisted it was the sheen of sweat, but something felt different. I had started going to bed earlier, after all.

‘Glowy? What did you look like before?’ You whispered to me as we explored my crumbling childhood home.

‘I can’t tell if that’s a compliment or not.’ I opened an old box full of spiders. ‘Why is it always spiders?’ I muttered, flinging the ones on my hands away.

‘To be fair, I can’t imagine you looking *that* haggard.’

‘*That* haggard?’ I threw a spider at your face before realising it wasn’t there.

‘You know I’m joking.’ The walls echoed. ‘Besides, I’ve seen you naked—’

‘Please don’t remind me of the exam hall incident!’ That was one of our few dreams I wished I could forget. I then climbed into the attic that I knew, inexplicably, would be on fire.

‘Just saying, you looked nice—for someone who was so clearly unprepared!’

If I hadn’t been fighting off what were now flaming spiders, I could have sworn you—or I—were flirting with me.

‘Are you saying you liked what you saw?’

Silence.

‘Of course I did. I mean, I like you.’ Everything disappeared except you. You sat at the window.

‘But you don’t know me.’

‘But you know me?’

‘But I don’t!... I can’t.’ The words stumbled out and felt too blunt as they cut the space between us.

‘Right.’ And with that, you were gone. Again.

You disappeared for a while after that. The absence drove me crazy. I found myself talking about you with my friends. They would frequently forget you were not real, and occasionally so would I. I knew they were tired of me but I couldn’t help it.

‘Maybe you should look up what this means or something,’ they said, half-distracted over half-drunk coffees.

I knew it was the sensible thing to do, but I could not bring myself to. I tried briefly, but part of me knew I was reading a story I did not want to know the end of.

As my finger traced across the library shelf, I halted at the psychology section. I wasn’t meaning to look there, but I couldn’t help but linger over a particular title: *‘Jung At Heart: What Do Your Dreams Really Mean?’* Against my better instincts, I picked it up.

The Second Lives of Losers

'I wouldn't read that if I were you, absolute crock of shit.'

I turned around. Felt the breath catch in my throat.

'Do we know each other?' You raised your eyebrow at me. I wanted to explain, but at that moment, as I tried to grasp for it, it pulled away from me. Sand from underneath my feet.

'Um... no.' I spluttered. My mind was blank.

'Oh right.' He paused. 'You just seemed very familiar. No worries.'

I turned back to the shelf and slotted the book back. Why couldn't I remember? Why couldn't I think of anything to say?

'Hang on,' you called out. 'I think we work in the same building.' You raised the bike helmet in your hand.

Oh.

Of course. Something in my mind came into focus. I had seen you in the lobby. You sometimes rode your bike in at the same time as me. I recognised it as you were always wearing the most garish ensemble of skin-tight lycra and a chunky neon helmet. There had never been that much of you visible except your nose and sometimes a stubbly chin. You looked different, yet familiar.

'Oh, yes. Hello again.' I felt my cheeks go scarlet from leftover embarrassment. You fidgeted with your watch.

'I'm sorry if this is weird, but I've just moved to the area and could do with some insider knowledge, if you don't mind getting a coffee?' You looked nervously at the bike helmet on my satchel. 'Unless you're just passing through, that is.'

The relief washed over me.

'No, no, I'm not.'

Window Shopping

As I walk back through this suburban maze, I am slightly drunk, and alone.

It's late, although the summer sun hasn't quite set yet so the sky is still a vivid turquoise, with navy just starting to bleed at the edges. A welcome breeze blows through, my joints still sticky from the heat.

I take another swig from the can. I know the overly sugary taste will give me a terrible hangover but, at this point, I don't care. I have been walking along the main road for the last twenty minutes but as I passed each pub and takeaway, alone, with more and more prying eyes watching, I had to turn away.

We used to walk down this road on the way back from school.

You can't hear the voices or the gentle roar of cars anymore. Neatly pressed-together houses and immaculate front gardens sit in a very still silence. A shaggy lawn or domineering vine sits as an occasional outlier, but even that feels deliberate, curated somehow.

I go past Lizzie's house. The light is on, but the blinds are drawn. Lizzie hasn't lived there for at least five years, but I like to imagine her there in her living room, watching something. Maybe she would turn to the window, look right at me, see me without knowing.

I keep walking until I come across another turn. Left or right. I stop. Which way is it? Swaying a little, I settle on right.

The smell of honeysuckle. This feels correct, although I don't recognise any of the houses. Everything looks different in the dark. Yellow fragments tessellate with shadows. I think I see half a face in a car, but I look again and it's gone.

Another breeze comes, although this time it is colder. The sky is half-black now. Part of me regrets not bringing a jumper or something, although it is probably a good thing to stay alert.

Whilst on the last street, most of the houses have their curtains pulled, a few of them are surprisingly open. I'm walking through a gallery of empty domestic tableaux, beautiful furniture carefully positioned, waiting for a scene to start.

There is one that catches my eye. It is pristine like the others, although it has shunned the other houses' modern design. There are several shelves featuring a large patchwork of books. A modern TV but worn fabric couches instead of cool leather. A variety of mismatching cushions to decorate. There is some abstract art on the wall along with vintage poster prints, effortlessly chic in a way that screams *I have both*

taste and a personality.

And there are photos everywhere.

Photos on the walls, shelves, mantelpiece, even on the side tables. There's barely room to put a mug down anywhere.

I lean in closer, teetering over the small brick wall, crushing against my knees to get a closer look. Whilst there are a few odd characters, the same four people pop up again and again. A father, although with his long foppish hair and colourful shirts he strikes me as the bohemian *cool dad* sort. He probably has a record player and listens to jazz and would be the kind of dad who would catch you smoking but only smile and say, "Don't let your mother catch you doing that".

The mother is beautiful, with long wavy hair although it is often pinned back in a variety of styles, so you know she is only truly carefree when it's down. She wears paint-splattered shirts and always has some DIY project on the go, I can just feel it. A flash of my own mother, stuck in that cold house, everything falling apart, appears in my mind before I push it away with another swig.

The two children look at least teenagers now, with naturally blonde hair and deep tans that suggest they have already seen half a world before leaving school. Maybe some of the paintings are theirs, hanging above all the other pictures.

I think of my drawing on the fridge, the only place it could go lest we damage the paint on the walls.

I shake my head.

I want to dream of their life. These people aren't the nouveau riche of their neighbours. They spend money but don't care too much about it. Everything they buy screams of small hidden labels and casually bragging to friends at dinner parties about what a lucky find it was.

The sound of movement from inside wakes me from my reverie. I hadn't even noticed I had stepped over the small garden wall, blades of grass stabbing my toes through my sandals. My hands hover over the window frame for a moment before I realise what is happening and I turn away to escape. I jump over, tripping over the ridiculously low wall and dropping my can onto the manicured lawn.

I can't stop. Instead, I push myself up, running and running and running until I find the familiarity of the brightly lit street and cars whizzing past. I have emerged, the sound of my heartbeat still swirling in my ears.

I keep walking although the image of their living room stays fixed in front of me. I imagine them, watching me disappear. Maybe they

would run out after me. Maybe they would stay inside.

My train of thought is interrupted by the comforting lurid glow of the nearby Tesco's. My stomach groans. I have just enough for a bag of crisps to last me.

I go to stride in, but the security guard stops me. He is a broad yet not very tall man, but despite being a head smaller, he manages to look down at me. My heart quickens. Maybe they have been alerted to an absolute nutter running around the area, dropping cans and peeping into people's houses.

We stare at each other, neither of us saying anything until he nods down to my leg.

'You alright?'

I notice the blood dripping onto my grubby white shoe. I must have cut it when I fell over.

'It's fine,' I tell him before trying to go past. I only have enough on me for one packet, so I definitely don't have enough for plasters. He studies me carefully. I try to subtly sniff myself for booze.

He stops me again before walking over to the till and pulling out a small first aid kit. He hands over a wipe and a plaster. I reach down and wipe the grit from the wound before standing up to reply. I feel I should say something to him but he has already returned to the darkness outside, looking stoically outwards.

I'm finally inside and while I usually go straight for the crisp aisle, I notice they've turned up the air conditioning to full blast and against my slightly sunburnt skin it is perfection, so I meander around instead.

A couple pushes past me unaware, lazily picking up bottles of wine and nibbles. In between their shopping list they tease each other with barbs and jokes I can't understand, this private language slipping in and out of olive jars and vegetable boxes.

I want to dream of their life. I imagine myself hosting a dinner party. What would I cook? Maybe a decadent pasta dish for a main, with salad for those who could afford not to eat. Who would I invite? Who could I invite?

A staff member hovers by me. He tries to act casual, but I know he is watching my pockets so I move to the checkout, packet in hand. I smile at the cashier, to let him know I deliberately picked him instead of going for the self-service checkouts, but he doesn't make eye contact.

I leave, my eyes lingering over the security guard who remains looking away. For him, I am just another ghost to disappear into the night.

The Second Lives of Losers

Walking back on the main road, I feel the pub-goers' eyes on me once again. I turn to look at them once and several men's heads jerk back to looking at the bottom of their pint glass.

To them, with my dirty legs and unkempt hair, I must look a little wild. I feel a little wild.

I even imagine one of them following me home. Stalking down the path. I turn in case he is there.

Nothing but an empty phone box.

The houses fade from respectable terraces to mankier grey bricks until I stop at the one with the scruffiest lawn. The plants have overgrown everything, including the old lawnmower that now lies as a relic to the one time we tried to tame it.

I look up to the top right window, which is illuminated. Mum's bedroom. You can't see anything except the ceiling because it's too high up, but you can still see the cotton lampshade we bought at a car boot. The light is still on. I have left it on, because no matter how much it hurts after, it is nice to have that moment to think she might still be in.

I turn the key and enter. Navigating my way around the piles of boxes and bin bags, I am no longer drunk, and still alone.

Georgie Brooke



Georgie completed her BA in English at the University of Bristol, before retreating back to her Mancunian stomping grounds to complete a MA in Creative Writing. She is (annoyingly) adamant that poetry should be read aloud. She is interested in permeating the static spaces between music and spoken word poetry, and is creating her own post-punk sprechgesang that she is probably too shy to share with you. For now, she writes word-spew for The Quietus. Georgie also writes poetry about the overlaps between identity, self-growth, queerness, environments, and feminism (so basically everything). Georgie is interested in widening accessibility to poetry (especially for those from low-income backgrounds, like herself). She is currently investigating how young people can be encouraged to develop their self-expression through poetry.

In the darkroom

The monobath stains our lips a bitter blue

an impression of a field I'll never see again-your wide eyes
develop right in front of me.

And this is how we found love:

£3 wine in a screw-top bottle and an afternoon tucked away.
Me, lilac-haired and jejune,

ghost bleached by exposure

and the race for your heart.

An outline of hands dripping in borrowed light,

buttercups bent backward over grass,

plans conceived in intimacy:

together, we would help the dandelion seeds spread,
as if our puffs of breath alone could have birthed a generation,

as though our mouths were not already pressed together
between pale sips

My skin pricks as I agitate the tank, rinse off

the developer. Your eyes are clouded with silver halide; I dip your
gaze into bleach-flix.

Owed Summer

It is

smack dab in the pit of May.

I dream of

sky caught between shades of pink heat

and Foster's cans,

alongside a thin plastic punnet of cherries,

you, eating their flesh to the stone,

then making a gun of your mouth,

my mouth silly under the crown of mindless yellow

heat, sticky with peach-scented lip gloss.

And it felt like whole summers went like that,
perching
on the fire escapes of strange pubs between sets
wearing bare legs
looking down on streets all cigarettes and lip.
Now, we touch each other and prove that we're still here.
My bed sores formed like braille
a cipher, confessing that this creature was once me.

Rose water pools on windowsill,
an inside paradise of uninspiring prayers.
I close my eyes and wait
for shades of pink from the bright summer sky,
to shine red phosphene inside my eyelids.

The Sight

...a Reiki reader turns my hand amongst the cycle of a club crowd and tells me I have the oldest soul she's ever known. Retrospect of lust and blazing lives flashes in my eyes like it does not matter who I have touched before.

I take off what adorns me, I romanticise the moment my head slips under the bathwater. Turning myself over until I am not my bare body but my grandmother, lying among mountains, life and death straddled in the river as she accepts that she has cheated death for the final time. She slips away, back into particles and water, as I wash my face and emerge from dream to watery reflections and low yellow moon.

I learn that I cannot always tell dreams from reality, I am awake in both. My histories, glitzy alternatives, sunset shining down on all I own, in the life I never had. I look into the reflections in this window, mistake it for skin—my fingertips try to touch my face—but my features are unfaithful. This manifests like a mantra: Here. I am here.

I awake rheumy-eyed and Mancunian to see the dim light and morning outline of you, a soul split into pieces (I think about smashing ice into whisky, but my grandmother never drank). I remember how Grandma had the Sight, how she peered into tea leaves. I clutch a lump of amethyst and feel the warmth that takes me here. It glows like the way dusk gleams in dark rivers across the city. As I look for my face the river quivers with water lilies, blooming with the hand of my elders...

Redshift World

If time is 'a meaning that we impose upon motion'

how long have I been watching the shaking of dust?

This world

opens to the back of beyond,

with meadows, purpled like Blaukraut.

A sky, blaring neo-psych

fields full of my house plants—Calathea Networks, with
chloroplasts dividing like a Klimt
painting. Memories of friends, eating Chow Mein on the floor,

tidal waves of noodles, a lavish palette... a world textured by
different kinds of 'time'.

Images of myself, sometimes with pink hair, sometimes red,
resin rings, jelly nails, green eyeshadow, butterfly clips, tooth
gem—

Sweet and hungry for something she can't name—

hiding in her own estuaries ... sandbanks of golden sugar,
red dunes crumbling under wet feet, above hangs the peeled
pomelo, sucked to the navel of the
sky.

Somewhere liminal, images of pink-haired girls,
loosen jaws, hungry for a redshift world.

Here

(After A. Van Jordan)

1. 'In, at or to this position or place'

Eg // I have lived *here* my whole life. *Here* is where I learned to be lost but present. I look through the skylight: my back is pressed into generations of suburban houses, I'm jealous of the sky, how it can hold everything in a layer that floats over *here*. 'Oh! She was *here* a moment ago'. Now I'm chasing the ice-cream man for answers, who tells me 'It never happens for people like us, from *here*'. People wonder why they can't get to sleep *here*; do they not realise that their bodies are threatening to disappear? 'Just help me get the necklace off!' Grandma said as I unlatched the opal beads from around her, a cluster of moles glowing *here* on her slender neck, constellations falling in a drizzle of golden syrup. She placed the beads right *here* on my neck like inherited torment.

2. "To attract someone's attention"

Eg // Come *here*. It was the year of the tiger, and acne revealed its fiery colours on my cheeks with a bumpy persistence that proved it was *here* to stay. I tacked a Joy Division poster *here* over my bed, and developed bleached hair and kohl eyes to clash with the opal chained around my neck. We meet *here* at midnight. 'Here', you say as you passed a single scavenged cigarette between a dozen mouths. There are things we could only say *here* in the dark, as we swarmed to stolen blue-bins to set the insides alight and shoot green BB gun pellets into the night, as if we could tear a hole wide enough to suck us away from *here*... No moon tonight, its lustre is *here*, trapped in the opal beads that drag on my chest. It hurts *here*.

3. 'Used when introducing something or someone'

Eg // *Here's* the promise I said I'd lend you; *there, there, there*; it drags from the lips, a mantra. As long as I live *here*, I sit in every fragment of my past. *Here* lie the beads, if they drag me down, I will live and die *here*, in this town.

Zoë Wells



Zoë Wells is a writer, poet, translator, and freelancer from Geneva, Switzerland. She initially moved to the UK to study at UWC Atlantic College, Wales, before taking her BA in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Warwick.

She primarily writes long-form fiction and is an aspiring novelist. At the moment, she is drafting an AI-based grief fiction novel, as well as editing a collection of translated poems from the French-language writer Renée Vivien. Her reviews and writing have been featured in a number of publications, including *STORGY*, *Poetry Wales*, *Bandit Fiction*, *Ink*, *Sweat and Tears*, alongside the *Night-time Stories* anthology published by Emma Press.

The Hot Box is a standalone short story.

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The Hot Box

INT. HOT BOX – DAY – 7TH AUGUST 1976, PARIS

There's a fly somewhere. Every twenty seconds it buzzes, lands, quietens long enough for me to convince myself that maybe it has gone. Then the *clack* of the rotary trimmer slicing through fresh film comes, and it starts over.

Loïc spins round on his chair and rolls into my corner, handing me the next scene.

JEAN

Who goes there?

'It really is garbage, isn't it?' I say, flicking through the script.

He smiles, nods, and swivels back. Silent types make the best editors. They make for the best of most jobs in film editing—these days spent in the hot box, these blackened offices, heads bent down, agonising over minutiae, are not for talkative types. When it came to crunch time, you wanted to be surrounded by those who could keep themselves to themselves and get the job done.

JEAN

Show yourselves!

These films always go the same way. Some clean-cut, chiselled man in a three-piece suit flies out to save the government from some insurgency. Sometimes underground Nazis, sometimes rabid communists, this time some Moroccans out for blood. History re-written by those with more money and less time than sense. On Monday, Henri would get a call through from a producer, asking for a quick cut—a simple feature in a week, no problem. Within the day he'd

come marching through with a box of raw footage for Loïc, a list of effects for Martin, and a script of captions for me. He'd head through his office door, put his feet up, and collate the editing credits, his name topping the page as 'Head Editor' while Loïc scrubbed glue out from under his cuticles.

The fly is back. I pour out a measure of bleach, look at Jean's face through the lens. Of course he'd get the girl.

Henri's door swings open, filling the room with white light. He walks over to my desk and drops a single sheet in my in-tray. I smile at him. 'QUARTERLY EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK - JACQUES DUCHAMP'. Henri's artistic licence to kill a career right where it stands. I let it sit there, simmering. He heads back into his office, barely giving me a cursory glance through those round fucking wireframe glasses. I'll read the papers some other time.

INSURGENT N3

What are we going to do?

The door to Henri's office remains slightly ajar, letting through sounds of the radio—the *météo* and reports of potential water rationing if the heat wave gets worse. It drowns out the sound of the fly.

I coat each of the sixty-odd frames of the last line of dialogue in paraffin while the printing press heats up the text plates. The air, previously waxen and stodgy, feels loose and metallic now, like an autoroute on a warm day.

EXT. MOROCCO – DAY – THE SHOOT-OUT

BANG

Our hero cranks the reluctant printing press into life. The frames enter the counter, sweltering under temperatures in the hundreds of degrees, only a little warmer than the sidewalk outside or the air of an unventilated office of four. The paraffin at the base of the frame melts slightly, slackening just past the correct amount. I press the metal text into the first of the negatives.

What are we going to do?

The next sixty frames go past like clockwork, and then the scene after that, and after that, until the hour's passed and Loïc is nearly done fixing the next brown box of footage. I take the newly pressed frames

and hold them to the light. The sound of Henri's shouts rings through the office.

What are we going to do?

Sweat is building up in the creases of my forehead. I wipe it away, back, into my hair. I'm beginning to look like one of those turtleneck art types, the ones who sit outside smoking cigarettes, hair gelled, eating smoked salmon baguettes and talking about the women they're sleeping with behind their wives' backs, in all the time they spend not working on films. The kind of person who doesn't sit in a dimly lit room wearing safety goggles, rubber gloves, and a fume mask that traps their mouth-sweat in rings on their face. A sweat goatee. The girls really dig it.

The paraffin coated frames are lowered carefully into the prepared bleach before being placed on the drying rack. This is the real movie magic: the acid burns away at the exposed film but only in the cracks revealed by the metal press. Precisely controlled chaos, creating gaps of white in the shapes of letters. When they're dry, the captioner checks them through the red light, looking for wayward burns, careful not to add any additional errors. The film is at its most fragile here. Hold it to the light too long and he'll burn it further, bubbles and trouble, faces distorted. White light filters through the centre of the boils, red outlining the sides, like bone seen through burnt skin. No, better to keep it out of the light as much as possible.

What are we going to do?

The serifs are a little hairy; a line or two of dirt, scratches, errors from pushing the paraffin this way or that; flashes of white, impossible to notice individually, but together damning. The errors that you hardly think of, but that burrow into your eyes. Like wind noise, like high-pitched ringing, like background actors staring into the camera. The little things.

But what can you do?

INT. HOT BOX – DAY – 8TH AUGUST 1976, PARIS

BANG

I jerk awake. Loïc rolls back to his corner wordlessly. I check the time. It's morning. Henri is outside, enjoying his morning cigarette and

smoked salmon sandwich. He's chatting with some local producer he's hoping will bring to life the screenplay he's had sitting under his desk since he left film school five years ago. His radio is blaring through the office. If it bothers Loïc or Martin, it's impossible to tell from their hunched silhouettes and quiet breathing. The fly is sitting on the quarterly review today, making him all the easier to ignore. Someone left the bleach out, the lid undone.

My mask is in the bin. It's too warm to wear it—my mouth-sweat layers it away from my face, letting in air, rendering it redundant. 40 degrees. And no fans in the office, for fear of flying papers and lost footage. The windows are shut. The Hot Box has really earned its name.

I check Loïc's new papers.

The beautiful Penelope has entered the scene now. She'll be dead within a day. These scripts have to have those femme fatale types, the ones you fall in love with even through three-centimetre wide frames. Smooth skin accentuated in the red light, a bleach white smile, eyes that bore into your soul without her even looking at the camera. She's a translator, I think, a double agent whom the hero meets while trying to get back some classified files he lost in the first act. By the third act, she'll reveal that she never leaked the information to the insurgents. That she didn't compromise him. That she loves him.

End screen. Gag. The smell of bleach has hit my nostrils. Back into the machine.

EXT. MOROCCO – DAY – THE MEETING

The press is plenty hot now. It takes less than ten minutes to heat it up these days, as opposed to the usual 40. The captioner is filtering through the script. Act 1, Scene 8: Penelope walks across the scene, ordering a Scotch on the rocks in Arabic from the barman. Jean notices her from under the brim of his hat.

JEAN

Not an ordinary drink for a woman.

PENELOPE

I am anything but ordinary.

It's hard to fit the captions right on the screen. Too high and they run along her upper lip like a Chaplin moustache, words brimming

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like sweat. Too low and they cut over her bottom lip, hiding the subtle quiver, the signpost that tells us that she is the one, the only one that matters in this whole charade. She is the reason we're here.

The office door swings open and Henri comes in, hovering over Loïc's desk. He doesn't look up. Penelope smiles back at Jean, coy, yet achievable. Somewhere a fight breaks out. Henri shouts at Loïc. The Moroccans are in the bar, Jean and Penelope hide behind the table, pistols drawn. Loïc sits there, taking the bullets in. Henri throws a glass. *CRASH*—the Moroccans break through the window during their escape. Henri slams the door shut behind him, the gust of air pushing the remaining frames out of place, a cloud of dust settling over the image. Penelope holsters her gun. Loïc wipes away the bleach from his shirt. Martin hardly shuffles from his station.

I am anything but ordinary.

The quarterly feedback sits there. I can taste the heat, I think to get a glass of water but the office is on pause, still frame. My eyes linger on the measured bleach. The fly buzzes on top of the paper. My hand pulls the lamp down, the light growing in intensity, red, hot, then the shade touches the paper and there's a sizzle and a crack, like radio static.

The captioner lifts the light a little, smiles at his work, then returns to the frames.

INT. HOT BOX – DAY – 9TH AUGUST 1976, MOROCCO

Penelope offers me a drink. I gratefully accept, making sure my hand avoids her skin for fear of moving the slides even a little. Touch the paraffin and her face will melt. I don't touch my face either. I don't touch anything, least of all the quarterly report.

Loïc doesn't show up for work today. He is not so easily replaced as the others who came before him, the chatty ones. Henri fumes and smokes in his office. The flakes of ash carry through to this room. I think I see them settle on Penelope's face. She says she doesn't mind, she's a smoker herself, but her flames are elegant. I wipe away the ash from her face. It stays there, but her face doesn't. Henri shouts down the phone. Martin is at Loïc's desk, trying to pull together the final edit between his sweaty hands. I can't stand the thought of Penelope being cut away by him, snip here, snip there.

Jean is back. He sweeps her in for a kiss. She's caught off guard, slips a piece of paper out of view. I let the metal plates drift further up the press, punching Penelope's words over Jean's face. Why should she

care for him? Just another smartly dressed Parisian nobody, who thinks he can be someone if he shoots this person, hits them, talks to the right people in the right circles. Jean lowers his hat—he has to leave. A final shot of Penelope. She's heartbroken, but her face changes when he leaves the shot.

Her eyebrows furrow. Her chin is elevated slightly. Jean has his back turned, but the captioner holds the frame to the light, analysing the way her jaw cuts through his minute window. The mole on her cheek. She's ruined by the red light, whore's light. Penelope deserves the white light of the sky, the real world. She deserves so much more than words that are cut into her skin, that cut away at her until she's nothing but his words, his thoughts.

MARTIN

What happened to your hand?

He didn't get the memo to keep your head down and work. I grab his box, move my hands away from him.

MARTIN

Is that a burn? From the bleach?

CAPTIONER

Bleach doesn't burn like that. It's the heat.

MARTIN

Pretty fucking bad sunburn.

We haven't been outside during the day since the heatwave started. There's a sofa that we take turns sleeping on. All I smell is heat, sweat, bleach, Loïc, sizzle, buzz, white noise filling my ears. The lamp burns flesh. The paraffin coats my fingers, everything I touch is felt through the waxy mesh, only vague outlines. And everything I touch burns.

Sweat, bleach, sizzle, *buzz*. The frames of her face left drying and burning, boiling under the red light of the desk. Dip fresh frames in bleach, let it dry out. The paint comes undone. The fly buzzes—but the fly is dead—the radio buzzes and Jean is shouting down the phone again, shouting at the Moroccans and producers and Loïc is burning under the lamp. The footage is buzzing. The phone rings. The captioner scratches her face and then his face melts in the August heat and acid burns. The bleach sizzles. The phone buzzes. The radio is dead.

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HOT. BOX – DAY – 10th PARIS 1976

HENRI

What's taking so long?

The captioner slots the reel of the first cut into the projector, careful not to let the sweat from his fingers touch the delicate frames. Penelope smiles at him from the pages. Martin sits in his corner.

BANG, clack, buzz.

The projector whirrs into action. Act 1, scene 1, the start of the film. The roguish Jacques crosses through the frame, getting his marching orders to go to Morocco.

Act 1, scene 8. Penelope enters the scene. She melts away into the background, white perfection in the heat, silhouetted.

HENRI

What the fuck is this?

Everything melts away, the buzzing, the white noise, the radio, the heat. All that remains is Penelope. And even Penelope bubbles, boils, her skin tears at the corners in acid burns showing the white bone underneath, her eye sockets empty save for the spotting, the dust, the dirt, the flies that are sitting in there now. You don't need those, you need only your mouth, the cut beneath your chin, your mole, these are the reasons we love you. And of course your words, your

I AM ANYTHING BUT ORDINARY

over and over, that's all you need. You're perfect now, don't you see that? Bleached away, her bleached white teeth, the smell of her perfume, the bleached white face of a bleached white woman and

I AM ANYTHING BUT ORDINARY

Henri stops swearing. He's silent, staring. Then he laughs. He laughs. We're laughing, and he's saying you've really done it now kid, you've really fucking done it, he's laughing, Martin's laughing, the radio, Loïc, the fly, the heat, the flesh, the captioner, they're all laughing, they've really fucking done it now haven't they haven't they haven't

I am anything but ordinary.

Andrew Kelly



Andrew Kelly is a young writer from the Wirral, where he lives with his beloved cat. He is both a fiction writer and a poet—something which will no doubt change once he realises that it is a mountain of a task to be both. On the surface, he would tell you that he likes dipping his toes in all forms, expanding horizons, but in truth, he hates decisions. His work has previously appeared in the WRITE Festival's Anthology.

This is a shortened adaptation of the opening of his novel, 'Grande Luca'. It explores dealing with loss (and not dealing with it), friendship, acceptance, and change, with a narrator who may not always be truthful and open. It exists in the beautiful town of Portovenere—so it's like you're on holiday! The characters explore the scenery, delve into literary history, and unearth past traumas.

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Grande Luca

I received a phone call. It was a local to home number, an English number. However, I was in Portovenere, where I'd decided to settle. Nothing had been happening for me back in England. Every Tuesday I'd play for a pool team in the local league, win, drink, go home. Through the rest of the week, I'd work, and then once again, Tuesday came. And repeat. I'd enjoyed it, but something drew me to Portovenere.

The number wasn't saved in my phone, so I let it ring out. It was a mobile number, so if it was something important, a text was easy enough to send my way. I doubted it was work-related, as I kept that online, with correspondence done through email. I was a proofreader, mainly for academic papers and occasionally fiction. I could take it anywhere with it being mainly online. The accommodation in Italy was cheaper than living at home, so it was a no-brainer moving. It was an enjoyable job—perfect for me. Face-to-face contact was minimal, which was a positive, as I liked my own space and would rather avoid any potential awkward interactions. The work was informative and educational too—I learnt a lot from academic essays; for example, I now know that esomeprazole is the S-isomer of omeprazole, and it is also a proton pump inhibitor. I also know words like 'benzimidazole' and 'anticholinergic', though, I couldn't tell you anymore about the treatment of gastroesophageal reflux than the scientific jargon.

Anyway, the good thing about the job was that I could read about NSAID-associated gastric ulcers anywhere I wanted, with an internet connection.

Portovenere wasn't just a random throw-a-dart-on-a-map choice—it was somewhere I'd visited a few times already.

The weather was glorious. There was a constant blanket of heat, but being on the coast, there was a faint breeze which slid between the gaps, giving that brief relief from being too hot. It wasn't like in

England where the hot weather was clammy—it was clean, unpolluted air. I was by no means built for the Mediterranean climate though: my skin was too English—ghostly white if caught in the wrong lighting, though I was training it gradually to become more accustomed to forty-plus degree heat and the ray-gun waves of the sun.

One issue with my work was that, on occasion, some of the studies made me much, much more aware of certain illnesses, and at times, completely paranoid. Reading about basal cell and squamous cell carcinoma in people under thirty frightened me into investing in 100 SPF sun cream, which I hadn't known even existed until I researched it. I tried to carry a bottle everywhere I went in Portovenere. The occasional burn slipped through, mainly behind the ears, but I kept on top of it mostly.

My place in Italy sat high up, but this time on the side of a hill, stacked on top of winding roads, greenery, flats, and houses. It was a small studio space, terraced between several other studio flats, which all looked identical from the outside. Each had a small balcony overlooking the road, with a view straight to the sea. It was pillared by rich green trees, the clear blue sky on top. In the middle of the trees was the postcard cut-out of beachgoers just off the main town, with green and yellow umbrellas dotted about, reserved for the tourists who wanted to pay to sit under them, spread across the sand, and wooden jetties stretching into the water, where boats of all sizes sat parked. They looked like toys on a miniature boating lake, small enough that I could pick them up, pinching the sails with two fingers, and delicately place them somewhere else.

I avoided the main beach. Tanned Europeans, locals, visitors, their bodies open to the sun. Toned men and women running around with beachballs and volleyballs, dipping in the sea, being nibbled up by the shallows, then deeper up until their chins before being regurgitated back out onto the cushiony sand. I didn't like going into the water here, so would always stay back a little way if I was at the beach.

People-watching was fun, but when the people you were watching were having more fun than you, it made it significantly less fun. This was especially true when the people were all in great shape with clean skin, and then there was me, laying there, slim but with a little flab of belly popping over my shorts and wearing so much sun cream that I looked like I was sweating—which I was. It was like I was double sweating.

I split most of my time between my studio and the main town.

The balcony was a nice place to do my work. During the summer, for most of the day, the building would keep the balcony area shady, so the laptop screen wasn't hard to see. When the sun did peek around, or if it got too hot, I'd take my work indoors. It was a small space, with a tiny kitchen, which thankfully included a washing machine; incredibly helpful with the amount I sweated on the hotter days. The living area with a pull-out sofa bed that was pulled out into a bed one hundred percent of the time. When I first moved here, the intention was to fold it back into a couch every morning, and for a couple of weeks I did, but it was one of those things where it just felt like too much effort and inconvenience to do every day, even though it wasn't much effort at all.

If I fancied a different vibe, I'd shove my laptop into a backpack, along with two bottles of sun cream and three bottles of water, and trek down the steep hill to the core of Portovenere. The view was great the entire walk down, save for the larger houses getting in the way, but even then, the architecture was nice enough that I didn't mind. There was one house in particular which I liked to look at, perhaps for too long. I'd never seen anyone go in or out, so for all I knew they could be looking out the windows back at me, thinking *what is this pasty foreigner doing looking at our house?* They had a CCTV camera perched up over their gated entrance, so I made sure to stand out of the way a little. The walls of the house were bright, almost neon white, so white that I was convinced someone must come by after dark and re-paint the outside every night. On each side of the stone archway entrance stood a palm—grand, phenomenal palms, at least thirty-plus feet in height, folding out with leaves which could make hammocks.

At the bottom of the steep hill, the land flattened towards the coastline, allowing the world to open up. The sky globed around the huge empty space full of bright diamond blue. The water spread out, its surface an expanse of glittering gems. The horizon was non-existent, as the two meshed together into a haze. Over the water was Isola Palmaria, a tropical-looking island, buried under trees. A large green heap—but a gorgeous, large green heap. It appeared far away, the heat in between here and there hovering like a fog, making it look blurry. But it was so large that it also appeared so close, and if you reached out your hand, you could be tricked into thinking you could touch it. Maybe it was these views which brought me back. Maybe it was the weather, or the peace of life. This was what I'd tell people.

A missed call notification popped up on my screen after it had rung out, so I put the phone into my pocket and walked down the

coastline towards the town.

Eyy, tre euros amico!

This was Mahmut, a Turkish man who stood, all day every day, behind a fold-out table with an Italian flag draped over. Spread across the flag were neat rows of sunglasses. Some frames were simple black, white, or grey, but others were multicoloured, set out in a rainbow pattern. Mahmut was wearing a pink and yellow flowery shirt with blazing pink shorts, with a matching Hawaiian lei around his neck. The dazzling outfit was welcoming to tourists who passed by, especially when he turned up his charm.

'Amico, look,' I said, pointing to my eyes. My finger was aimed towards the sunglasses already on my face, which I'd bought from Mahmut during my first week of living here. I'd bought them for ten euros. His prices had plummeted significantly, which I liked to remind him of.

'Ten euros Mahmut, ten!' I repeated, tapping them.

'Abh, but second pair for only three euros, come on amico,' he said, holding out a pair of creamy yellow sunglasses, his smile wide and commercial.

I pushed my own glasses up to my forehead, raised my eyebrows and shook my head.

'Abh, okay, okay! Ciao Daz!' he said, and we both gave a small wave as I carried on walking.

Large yachts dominated the view ahead, the marina playing host to the boats likely owned by the people in the bigger houses with the CCTV. The tall masts all together looked like an army. They weren't an eyesore though, in fact, they only helped add to the feeling of always being on holiday. Just before reaching the ice-white naval flotilla, I turned inwards towards the town. The buildings were long and thin, all misshaped and unbalanced, painted different shades of red, blue, yellow, and pink, like sweets stuck together.

Most of the buildings were bars or restaurants, placed there for tourists, and I'd tried them all at least once. My Italian wasn't great, in other words, I knew the absolute bare minimum to get by, so I relied on others to know English. Portovenere, despite attracting tourists, didn't have a huge number of English speakers, so it was largely broken conversations if I were to have any.

I headed for a place where I knew the owner *did* speak English—Silvio, who owned a small pub-restaurant, called *Silvio's*. Inside, the walls were lined with shelves holding hundreds of unopened bottles

and cans of beer from years ago right up until now. The shelves were wooden, but looked very unsteady and aged, and it shocked me that in the many times I'd been here, with the many drunk people who left when it came to closing time, that no one had ever knocked anything from the shelves. It was dizzying sometimes to be surrounded by so many individual beers, like little people seated around in a stadium.

'*Daz!*' came a shout from behind the bar.

Silvio whipped a towel over his shoulder and walked around the bar to greet me. He did this every time I entered, and every time anyone else that he knew entered. He approached me, pulling me into a hearty hug, kissing both cheeks.

'Hungry?' Silvio asked.

'Just a drink, *per favore*.'

Silvio returned to behind the bar. He was an average-sized man, maybe just teetering on the smaller side, but he had a pigeon chest and large arms that made him look bigger than he was. He had a large nose which dominated his face, making his eyes and mouth look small. He was always smiling.

He filled up a glass with the drink he would always give me, although I didn't know what it was. I had asked once, but he'd replied in Italian, and I'd felt too awkward to ask again for the answer in English. It was free, so it was nice. In fact, the mystery of it created a magical sense around the drink—around the whole place. It was a black liquid, maybe ale, but I'd never found anything close to an equivalent. There was something about the alcohol in Italy. It might have been the hot weather which made the coldness of it so much more refreshing, hitting the back of the throat like ice, or maybe it was how it was brewed, but either way, it tasted good.

'Drink for you,' Silvio said, pushing the drink across the bar, the bottom of the glass scraping the polished wood.

Silvio poured himself the same drink. We both raised our glasses.

'Luca.'

'Luca.'

After a sip, I began taking out my wallet, knowing full well that he would tell me to put it away.

'Put it away *amico*,' he said, 'right, I leave you to your work—music?'

'Si, Billy Joel?'

'*Si*, bravo, *buongusto*!' Silvio said, clapping me. It helped that I knew Silvio had Billy Joel playing in here most of the time anyway, so I

remained even more on his good side by the choice of music. From a speaker somewhere that I couldn't see, *Vienna* began playing. I picked up my drink, set it down on a table, took out my laptop, and began reading through another pharmacy essay, this one on the effects of lansoprazole.

During the day, not many people would come into Silvio's, and if they did, it was never crowded until the evenings, so it was a good space to work. Plus, it was one of the only other places apart from my flat where I could get Wi-Fi.

'Ciao Eveliina!' came a call from Silvio.

I turned my head briefly to see a woman enter the bar. I hadn't seen her before. I only caught a small glimpse of her as she passed where I was sitting, but in that brief moment, I could tell that she was beautiful. Her figure was slight and slim, and she was gliding instead of walking. She had blonde hair, so bright that it could even be white, or translucent with an ever-present sun bouncing off it. They shared a couple of kisses on their cheeks, and he served a drink to her. I think I heard 'vodka' said in their exchange. I put my head down and carried on working, leaving them to their talk, but a few minutes later, after Billy's *Roberta* finished, my ears tuned into their conversation during the momentary silence between songs.

'So still no good news?' Silvio asked.

'All the same. This place is so nice anyway, so I don't mind being on my own.'

I could tell from her accent that she wasn't English or Italian. Definitely European though. Her English seemed to be quite good, so I guessed she was Scandinavian, simply due to my preconceived idea that people from Scandinavian countries were very intelligent, and generally spoke English well. I wondered why she would visit on her own. Or maybe she wasn't here on a holiday. Maybe, like me, she was here permanently, seeking a life with incredible summers and postcard views.

'Well, you are always welcome here at any time. Ask Daz right there,' Silvio gestured towards me. I looked up upon hearing my name.

'Pardon?' I asked, pretending that I wasn't listening.

'I was telling Eveliina that she is welcome here any time. Like how you are welcome.'

'Sì, yes. Silvio is very inviting.'

'Bah,' he called out, waving a hand at me, 'this man is too kind. Si, any time Eveliina. Wait! *Scusi*, where are my manners. Daz, say ciao

to Eveliina.’

She turned to look directly into my eyes. Hers shot a sharp green towards me like a bullet.

‘Yes, *si. Ciao,*’ I said, holding my hand up, straight in the air and open-palmed. I smiled, but not so much a smile, more the mouth movement where you straighten your lips and almost pull your mouth into your face a little bit.

Looking at Eveliina more clearly, I guessed she was in her mid to late twenties. She was around the same height as Silvio, who was currently leaning with both elbows on the bar, meaning she was slightly smaller than him, meaning she was slightly smaller than me too.

She waved—an actual wave compared to mine.

‘*Ciao*, er, *Daz?*’ she asked, saying my name slowly, dragging each letter.

‘Just a shortened name. Darren if that’s easier. But yes, Daz is right,’ I said all this very quickly, but she didn’t seem confused. This furthered my belief that her English was more than sufficient.

‘I will see you both around,’ she said, smiling, before leaving.

Silvio picked up the empty glass she left and went through a doorway, where I heard him quickly wash it. He returned, humming *Sleeping with the Television On*, which had begun playing during our interactions with Eveliina.

‘New friend Silvio?’

‘*Si, si*, she’s from Finland—’

I quietly took a moment in my brain to congratulate myself for deducing where she was from.

‘—arrived a couple days ago,’ he continued, ‘and said she would come in for a drink or two during the day, so you will see her a few more times I expect.’

I nodded.

‘That’s a fact you’re happy with, no?’ he said, eyebrow raised. He was teasing me.

I shook my head, letting out a breath.

‘*Scherzo*, joke, joke. Playing with you. Another drink?’

I walked towards home back along the shore. The early evening sky was fading from blue to a deep, warm orange. I breathed in the air, the slightest trace of salt, sweet on the nose. I took my time, the air wrapping cosily around my body. It felt like someone familiar was behind me, wrapping a blanket over my shoulders.

I could see Mahmut in the distance, in conversation with a figure, no doubt using his charm to sell a pair of glasses. Getting closer, I noticed the white-gold hair, now tied up into a bun.

‘*Bella*, only two euros! *Due euros*. So cheap, great bargain!’ said Mahmut, holding out a pair of sunglasses in front of him, nearly forcing them into Eveliina’s hand. I approached the pair.

Su Ormerod



Su Ormerod is a late-emerging writer—it's a long story.

She was born in Oxford, and Cornwall is the place she calls home. Her heritage in the Potteries, North West and Ireland was the inspiration for studying creative writing in Manchester.

She has a keen interest in the *in-between place*, and the space it opens for exploration and experimentation. Her sources of inspiration—people and conversations, the natural world and coastal landscapes, and more recently, the urban scenes of an industrial past.

If her work were handwoven cloth, ways of seeing, subjectivity, identity, and the stories we live by, would be threads in a recurring pattern.

Su is currently working on her first novel *The White Room*, which has a non-linear structure. With the direction of travel often revealed in the text and the need to loop back and forth, the extract is still very much a work in progress.

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The White Room

‘As a white wall cuts itself into pages in the shadows, she finds herself stepping into the room as an idea in the architect’s head.’

The White Room

She is—a silence—words will erase

May

Now

The room in the old silk mill was the room she hadn't known she was looking for until she found it.

Then

Finding the silk mill was an unexpected surprise—there wasn't a date stamp or a ribbon.

She was out walking on the streets of the old mill town. Exploring. Looking for the particular in the rows and rows of houses—and the one house on every street where the clock seemed to have stopped.

She turned a corner—there had been many. She liked to feel the expectation, it was built into them—and hope, though she was less aware of that—then. In her imagination—they were all corner shops.

She started walking up a hill, a row of houses on either side—it was like a walled entry. She felt the draw, looked up towards the top, and standing there—was an expanse of red bricks and huge windows in cahoots with light.

There—was an old manufacturing block, houses silhouetted in the windows lit up by the lowering sun.

She imagined the inside of the mill to be expanding in the light. She saw her want for a white space that was full of light.

She knew she had to look inside—to see if what she imagined—was real.

Then

She returned a few days later, to view the empty apartment at the top of the mill. She was sure, the architect was just one step ahead drawing it in with black ink—the dropped ceilings and partition walls.

She was glad she had asked to view it alone, not wanting the burden of someone else's expectations as she opened the door.

It felt heavy, the front door—like the wood was wet enough to douse the very idea of a fire, or even a light in the long passage. There was a line of closed doors to her left, and a wall to her right, and she could see at the end, a door, as though roughly outlined with a light tipped pen.

She knew she was there to open it, she had no idea why, or what the consequences might be.

She felt a contraction as her eyes took in the white light, and then, like an unthought of first step, she was carried into the sunlight streaming into the room—it felt like the warm currents that flow and thread round the group of small islands in the blue-green sea.

She felt the ripples rippling from a light pebble.

She felt that she had stepped into a live conversation, in a corner where the front and side walls met with a tall and wide window on either side.

The other rooms in the apartment, lined up one after the other, each built around a tall and wide window on the south side of the mill.

On her first night there, she felt like gorse and broom waiting to be lit.

Now

She is asleep in the room she made into a house—a room in a house that others made.

When she wakes in the mill for the first time, she will want what she always wants—

the walls to be lath and plaster with the hair of animals, and to see more than the red rim of clay bricks round the windows, to be able to see the bricks and know that someone has dug for the clay, moulded and fired them in a kiln and laid one on top of the other to build the shell she is standing in—to look out of the windows with the original stone sills and to know who else has stood there—their names and when they were born and when they died and how they lived and where they were buried and that—it will all be inscribed in stone.

She will want to know that she doesn't need to imagine from start to finish—that there are physical traces—that it was after all the same sun that rose and set for her as for them.

Then, she will begin again with the white page.

Now

She begins to wake, feels the cold air slip into the room, like silk, it slides down her face and she opens her eyes.

She looks up to the window from her bed on the floor to see a silvery-grey sky run through with the red of clay bricks—embers of a yesterday's sun.

On the sill, a nest of needle-twigs and hair woven into a celadon-green-moss. Inside, an unmade bed of down, with the scent of an animal. She had found it on the ground yesterday—the sort of finding that is a sort of losing.

She wonders about everything she sees—if anything is what it seems as she shapes the emboldened red in the sky into figures that bleed into a watery edge—feeling the pen shell's want of black ink.

She knows she is very impressionable, especially on waking, or still impressed by something that will step back into the light. She feels the

The White Room

sea wash over her as the moorland hills look on.

She is, she thinks, a hermit in an industrial shell on a silent shore.

Now

She looks at the room she is in—in the converted mill. She sees a chair waiting for her in the corner by the window that stands tall and wide, set deep into the red brick on the inside to be close to the light on the outside.

There is a second chair opposite, and if she sat there, she could peer over her shoulder but she doesn't see it.

She knows that she won't put pictures on the walls and disturb the whiteness. She won't inhabit the space. She will dwell.

She is, she thinks, intrigued by the uniform houses built round the mill that she sees from the front window, their street uniformity beautifully chaotic when seen from above, and their hues of orange, red and grey, ever-changing in the unbinding light and the falling rain. The congregation of chimneys, their roofs packed in close, and the pots, a perch for morning and evening song.

Now

It feels right to her, to have a bed on the floor in the living room where there are no curtains to draw back.

She is, after all, sitting inside a fabricated apartment inside a brick and slate manufacturing block overlooking a labyrinth of cobbled back entries behind the two-up-two-down back-to-back houses that surround the mill.

There is no conscious choice involved in her looking at the sky, it fills the windows, and with one window always open, it's easy for her to imagine she is out there among the clouds—with the blue butterfly swimming in air.

She dreamt she slipped out of the window, looked in, saw herself sleeping there, and then came back in.

When the wind comes—it is pushed up, down and around the sides of the building—pounding the rain on the glass like it will shatter. The unpredictability of life made visible, the feelings caused by so many things she can't see, but they are all the same. Things she doesn't want to see—in case it leaves her with nowhere to go.

Then

It reminds her of a day when she lived close to the sea—not that she's ever far from it—not really.

A strong gale was forecast to reach land in the early evening, at around the same time as high tide, with warnings of risk to life. She

went to the cove on the north coast, it was only a few miles away. It was unlike her, but that's most probably why she went.

She felt the beginnings of the alchemy of excitement and fear, and its influence on what she did. Cautiously at first, she stood looking down onto the cove from the coastal road. She could see the Atlantic swells and feel the pounding of the huge waves rolling in like she was already caved—shaped—to receive a powerful and unstoppable force. She felt a presence rousing inside, it felt palpable as she joined others, including the coastguard, in the seafront car park next to the harbour wall. It was formidable, the sea swelling beyond the capacity of the harbour to hold it until the tide turned—gusting on shore winds driving it in.

She felt alive in the wind and spray, her excitement growing as she was buffeted, unable to stand in one place and tasting salt without blood. She felt the tumult of the borderland. She faced the sea, swarmed forwards and back in a human swell, a part of everything. Expectation and fear blended with excitement were summed up as they waited for the rogue wave that would breach the borderland, exercise raw power and douse them in sea water, if they were lucky. She knew the tide was turning, bringing its own tumult and a momentary deep confusion.

Saturated by the crowd, she moved closer to the edge, where the waves were breaking. She wasn't alone in the space, a few others were willing to take the risk, but even so, avidly focused on the swell trying to read the unpredictable. She couldn't decide if she felt powerless or powerful in placing herself there—only that the rapidly changing dynamic held a power that was something else entirely.

A rogue wave rolled in, using the pier wall as a counterforce to rise high in the air, it surged, held its edge like a shout of victory until it reached the curve into the harbour and then fell in a sweeping stroke covering the car park with a sheet as it crashed.

Afterwards, at home in her granite cottage, she had sat for a while in the cave that was her kitchen, with a glass of red. Nothing had changed, the old range stood in the large fireplace, there was a slate floor and a floorboard ceiling—but rather than feeling held, she felt encased in a dimming light. As she got up to get some air, she felt the touch of silk on her neck like the breath of a sleeping child.

Now

She is feeling a sense of detachment—that the life she has led has not been hers—that she has watched it unfold—like it was already folded before she arrived.

The White Room

She doesn't wonder where the time has gone—just how much time there was.

So many loose threads she thinks that need threading and sewing into the unsewn places, or, just left loose for a time.

Now and then

She is there, and somewhere else.

She is in her garden, as it was then, with a glass of real ale, sitting looking at the white moon in the blue sky, and waiting for the in-between light of twilight. As she waits for that moment when she feels a keen sense of aliveness, she sees the tracing of orange, then yellow and a sheening black by the lowering sun's rays as it conjures a blackbird perched on the wall.

She is there, and somewhere else again.

She is waiting to meet Catherine, someone she met for a time, who listened as she talked. She'd been looking forward to seeing her, with a lot she wanted to say. It feels different from the start, they are in another room, something she always needs to consider.

Catherine arrives, takes in the room, considers switching the light on, but sees it's fluorescent and would flicker, tells her they wouldn't use it again, and puts the paraffin heater on.

11.00: They sit down and Catherine asks about her week

11.20: She hears a lone blackbird sing, and asks Catherine,

“Can you hear it?”

“Yes, I can,” she replies

12.00: Catherine gets up to leave

Catherine takes in the room, tells her they won't use it again, turns the paraffin heater off and closes the door after them.

She thinks that time is like raw silk, it is unwound as it is wound.

She is:

She is in a white room
with a blackbird perched
on a white plinth as if
suspended in air—
its song eternally on the

wing

The White Room

Then & Now

The room is white—but she sees that now—and then—there is the lightest touch of grey.

Not quite the grey-white of limestone—not yet—more the grey-white of fog.

She hears the fog horn sound—otherworldliness—as she stands in the room—and stands on the small uninhabited island.

She is in the remains of a medieval hermitage, not far from the house, built to take plague cases from the ships calling at the islands. Out there, she is part of the weave—part of the salted voices—boats of sand and haunting calls of the Max Shearwater—threaded with the sea silk of pen shells.

She climbs to the highest point of the small island to meet the fog. She makes it onto the craggy outcrop just as it thickens. She wants to step into grey-white—to disappear—to reappear—to herself. She imagines a threshold as the droplets land her, and the fog's chill turns in with her warmth as though invited—she hears the foghorn and sees the fog ripple.

Now and Then

It's early morning, she is still inside the night—her bottled-up-ocean-bottom-darkness. She is suspended—things floating loosely—like they have pigments and hues—a scene emerging and receding instantaneously—like it feels her response before she does. She feels like raw meat. She doesn't eat meat.

She feels herself slowly rising into the day. As she begins to let the night sink back, she sees it, as though on a split screen, and wonders if she has two nights stacked up—

There is a pale light in the room, like a second thought waiting behind the first. She leans into it to see where it's coming from, and as she looks up through the side window, there is a waxing crescent moon. She wants to be awake—to be in the natural light—but she wants to sleep more—until the light rays fall on her face.

There is a half-light in the room—it feels artificial. She watches the window grids abstracting on the walls and ceiling like scattering graphite dust—imagining a peppered moth with open wings. The edges of the stacks of books and furniture are partially erased, like they are no longer wanted in a 3D sketch.

The room feels like it is still an idea in the architect's head, and she wonders if he knows she is there.

Now

She is sitting in the room—in the chair—the one with the view that sits just to her left—that sits with what it is she wants to see.

When she had first stood outside the mill—she had imagined a white space, expansive and expanding in the light. An open space.

She looks for the pigeon that she can hear flapping its wings, trying to gain height so it can soar. As she thinks about things, she notices bits of white downy fluff floating past the front window. She can't quite make them out, so looks out of the side window, and there are hundreds and thousands coming her way.

She thinks dandelions—with delight, and recites a Haiku she once wrote:

*"My sun drips from the
Sky, stalking daffodils and
Splodging dandelions."*

She marvels at this wind-aided revolution of self-pollinators, and decides she likes the idea of being inside someone else's idea.

It reminds her of playing with Russian dolls, and when you look at the largest one—knowing you have placed the others elsewhere—somehow—they are still there inside—in the shape of it.

Then

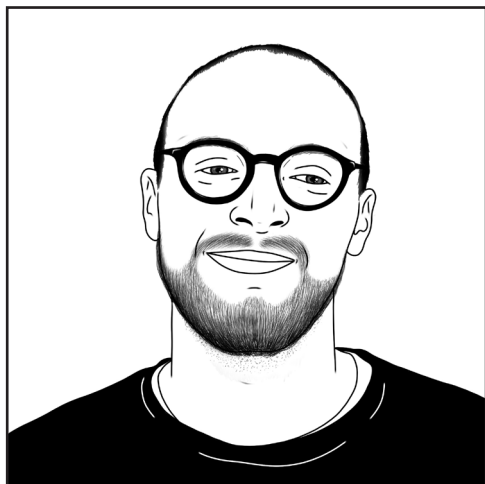
She remembers being surrounded by the clack of needles, and the making-over-and-over-again of the same pattern—variations in colour and size only—especially after washing, and the hand-me-downs.

She used to collect the wool ends—to knot together—to create a thread—from the bits that weren't wanted. She wrapped the wool round her finger to make a small ball to hold in her hand.

Now and Then

She thinks that it's through the slant of light that an idea is made possible.

Sam Burt



Sam Burt is a copywriter, tutor and recovering ex-teacher living in east London.

He has spent most of 2021 (and expects to spend much of 2022) writing his first novel, which is sampled here. He is also working on a series of linked short stories set in Afghanistan during the 1960s and '70s, examining its 'New Democracy' period from multiple perspectives; the first such story was published last year in *Popshot Quarterly*.

He is currently fiction editor for the journal *An Inking*, and previously edited the arts section of the *Mancunian* website. His essays, opinions and reviews have appeared in the *Guardian*, *The London Magazine*, and *3:AM Magazine*, as well as poetry in *Ink*, *Sweat & Tears*.

What follows is the opening of 'Conner and Mo', a novel exploring what it means to be 'openly' or 'discreetly' gay in the UK today.

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Conner and Mo

This is what not knowing your luck looks like: a spacious living/dining room in a Victorian house in North London, on a Friday night, lit by a vintage standing lamp belonging to an absurdly generous absentee landlord—a man who believes that everyone should get what they want, at least some of the time. On an oak-panelled dining table, there's a pad of A2 paper with what could equally be topographical sketches or patterns of fungal expansion—which a woman in her early 20s with a Mediterranean tan, in a crop top and low-slung jeans (it's the middle of June), who is laying out plates and cutlery, deftly lifts and transfers to one of the benches lining the curved windows that face out onto a small front garden with a fig tree (whose branches closest to the window are bare).

Lydia pauses, takes in the scene: is this what getting to know people looks like? Yes, it is. Has she gone a little overboard here? No.

In the middle of the table, she places a large wooden bowl of salad and dressings. A wooden *motherfucking* bowl. It's all about first impressions. Solange is playing through Alexa on the mantelpiece; part of what she's yet to title her dinner party playlist. There's an M&S cheesecake in the fridge and strawberries and prosecco. She turns off the heat on two tagines, one meat, one veggie, ladles them into glazed earthenware dishes and transfers them to the table. Someone's coming downstairs. Standing directly under the dining room lights and staring out at the unlit hallway, she feels like an actor on a stage.

It's important to Lydia that this doesn't become another house with "atmosphere." The A-word means living like a spider, on a web of tripwires. It means immeasurable pettiness and white noise machines. Lydia dreams of throwing out her white noise machine.

As far as house shares go, Lydia's gone from bad to worse. It's not

like she has a choice. Her mother lives alone in a studio flat. She tried a studio once: no. She doesn't cope well with being left on her own. That, and the thin walls her budget would cover. Perhaps she could manage in a vacuum, anywhere where she wouldn't hear conversations that make her feel excluded. These feelings of exclusion were the focus of her therapy sessions before her therapist died in an accident involving a photocopier. The only alternative, cohabiting with friends, is no longer an option for her at twenty-eight. She doesn't have a lot of friends, and they're all in studios or on the property ladder.

What matters is what she's learned: that atmospheric conditions tend to stabilise at an early stage in the life cycle of a house, without anyone having noticed. By the time someone checks a barometer, it's usually too late. In her experience, there are few things that seem less possible than trying to re-establish a pattern of small talk where said pattern has withered and died.

And so, here she is, running the experiment again. Thinking that, this time, through sheer force of will, she will bond the members of this house together. Films and TV have taught her that food is a good binding agent.

Moeiz shuffles into the light, head down. Looks up and takes in the scene reluctantly, biting his lower lip.

'Hi there! How's it going?' Lydia asks, light beaming from the plates and from her face, shining with sweat and steam. He shrugs.

'Shit, I didn't know you was going to so much trouble. Now I feel bad.'

'It's nothing.'

'Yeah, but. I already ate.'

Stay calm.

'Your face!' Quick thigh slap then, soberly, 'sorry, sorry, sorry.'

She scowls theatrically.

'Come give me a hand with the drinks.'

'You thought I was serious?'

'Ice goes in there.'

'Do I seem like that kind of guy?'

He gives her a look like she's questioned his honour. He's like a righteous schoolboy, she thinks. She must avoid this playfulness becoming actual flirtation. She must also try to avoid seeming to take his jokes too seriously. She has sometimes wondered whether 'must' features as heavily in other people's thoughts as it does in hers.

Two days ago, Moeiz had helped her move in, having only arrived himself five days previous. In the boxes he'd so eagerly carried - an enthusiasm fuelled by the industrial-scale pack of energy drinks she spotted in the kitchen - there were broken plates and picture frames, which she'd wrapped in newspaper and binned without comment. Show her a friendship without collateral damage.

Perched on the sideboard behind her, Moeiz flexes his fingers. His hands are always on the move; they look agitated when unoccupied. He cracks his knuckles one by one, then presses the palms hard on his thighs and moves them slowly up and down, rocking his whole body back and forth, turning his head this way and that. This is a good thing he's got here; he must try not to ruin it.

Over 'Junie', they hear someone come through the front door and go upstairs. They wait for him in the dining room. Lydia sits down for five seconds and then jumps up and rearranges things on the table, until they're back in their original positions. She does so in swift, darting movements, and under cover of small talk, for fear of drawing attention to the bitten skin around her fingernails.

'Sure, I cooked all the time at my old place,' she says. 'That was the vibe: not living with strangers. It just sort of happened. And so, we keep in touch still. Which is cool. Is that normal? Do you still hang out with yours?'

'You look like a magician,' Moeiz says, and then refills his glass. It's meant as a compliment but when he says it, she stops and sits on her hands. Magicians deceive.

Conner had moved in the previous evening, while Moeiz was working. Lydia postponed her shopping to wait for him, so she could help with his belongings. He was later than she'd imagined, and she was already anxious about being able to source all the ingredients for two types of tagines at such short notice. It was not, of course, possible to make something else—something simpler - instead; she had committed to making tagines in the house WhatsApp and did not want to give them the impression of being a flake.

When Conner eventually arrived, there was nothing for her to carry—the van was coming the next day. All he had was a rucksack in which he soon realised he'd neglected to pack basic things like his phone charger and toothbrush. He stared into it, mystified, as if someone else had packed it. So, they went to the supermarket together

and he carried her shopping back.

Conner was very sweet. He had piercings - a nose ring, which reminded her of a bull, a black ring through the left nostril, a silver stud through his earlobe and two small rings higher up the ear, which, in the supermarket strip lighting, were multicoloured, like splashes of gasoline on the pavement. His hoodie was the colour of instant custard and looked unworn, and he wore a black cap backwards. In line at the self-service, she pictured the two of them—if she'd been someone else - enacting anarchy in the aisles, shoplifting or scrawling obscenities and nihilistic aphorisms on cereals with marker pens or careening into pyramids of kitchen roll in trollies. He seemed younger than she could remember ever having been, but also gave her an excited feeling that she could learn it from him.

Conner walks in and Moeiz laughs. She isn't sure why.

'I have that exact sweater,' he says, by way of an explanation. The two of them shake hands stiffly and sit down. Something unexplained hangs in the air between the three of them, somewhere above the tumbler of cucumber water.

She makes small talk while serving but their responses feel strangely muted. When she sits down, it's as if they've both partly withdrawn into themselves. Moeiz mumbles wisecracks into his plate, which she pretends to hear and find amusing.

'What?' asks Conner each time he does this, but Moeiz only shakes his head and shovels in more food.

Conner is leaning forward, perched tensely on the edge of his chair. Every mouthful he takes looks like an effort. Tonight, he does not look like a destructor of kitchen roll pyramids but a store assistant too afraid to confront the adolescents messing his store.

Conner keeps his head turned towards Lydia and a forced jollity spews out of him. He questions her about her life in exhaustive detail, to the point where she can't take his nervous laughter any longer and tries unsuccessfully to make eye contact with Moeiz.

Moeiz appears to be entirely absorbed in eating and drinking and avoiding the possibility of speaking. He nods without looking up whenever his name is mentioned.

Lydia doesn't understand what's happening.

Three weekends ago. A hotel near an airport. A three-day young-people-in-business leaders-of-tomorrow motivational-conference type

thing. Who knows. A lot of young people, mostly men in suits, Young Conservative types, lots of back-slapping and playing at being daddy.

Conner, in a starched white shirt, black waiter's vest and bowtie (sans piercings), serving oily smiles and coffee, shuttling trays of prissy sandwiches from the kitchen to the tables around the edge of the function room, passing the time by pretending to slip powdered glass into the urns and picturing the more odious of these specimens on the floor, convulsing.

He gets these gigs at short notice through an agency. It's easy money if you can stomach boredom, which he can't, so he has to flirt with the clients. He camps up, to get attention, to shatter the grinding monotony. Dishes out winks left, right and centre.

'Watch yourself, *boney!* Now don't go spilling coffee on that *adorable* suit!'

Many of them do spill their coffee, in their rush to get away from him, which he counts as small victories.

It's a ten-hour shift but he spends less than half of it actually working. Morning break, lunch, afternoon coffee, evening meal, and the rest of the time's his own. He smokes a lot of cigarettes and drinks a lot of coffee, reserving the last, super-strength cup at the bottom of the urn for himself. He thought he'd be sneaking off for quickies with hotel guests every five minutes, but no. It's an expensive hotel, and something in him—a socioeconomic gag reflex—rebels at the idea of fucking an older version of these chiselled dickwads. It would mean they had won, somehow. He browses through attendees on the apps and gets turned on by the idea of switching to Alpha Male jackhammer mode in one of the cubicles - watching the shock on their face yield to fear and shame of their own enjoyment.

'Who's my lil' bitch, huh? You my lil' bitch? Gonna pay your taxes now, bitch?'

But their profiles are so fucking bland, so *anodyne*, like extras in a chewing-gum advert or extras in their own sex lives. Conner's other job is as a social media copywriter. He gets people's attention for a living. The previous autumn, he'd had his appendix out, and the office he worked for got a designer called Eline to cover him for a few weeks, rather than hire an experienced writer. In their preternatural blandness, these profiles remind him of Eline's tweets.

Need a boost? We've got you covered with great-tasting coffee every day of the week.

Try our coffee today! You know it's the right thing to do!

Mental health problems affect one in four of us, yet people feel ashamed and worthless because of this. So why not get a coffee today?

Conner was clearing away the starters when his phone vibrated several times in quick succession. Someone was horny, impatient, and baiting him with various body parts. With perfect composure, he lifted and stacked plates of leftover lobster mousse. There was a pleasure equal to sex in making whoever it was wait—Are you finished with these, sir? Shall I take these, madam?—and in knowing there was a stream of pure want waiting for him in his pocket.

He was *looking for RIGHT NOW*. There was some flexibility on the definition of *RIGHT NOW*.

He was passing through on his bike, with a delivery, so they'd have to be quick.

He said he was DL-4-DL (DL = 'The Down Low'). Was Conner discrete [sic]?

He was Black, early 20s, clean-shaven, buzz cut.

He cracked his knuckles while he followed Conner into the cubicle.

He seemed nervous until the cubicle door shut, and then it was straight to business.

He stayed dressed throughout but his pictures were sexy as hell.

His cock was big but not too big, smooth and beautiful and responsive to all of Conner's tricks.

He arrived rock hard and came in five minutes.

He said nothing afterwards except 'laters' when he jumped on his bike.

He said his name was Naz.

Moeiz empties his second plate while theirs are still half-full, and then starts devouring bread rolls to keep his mouth full.

Lydia wonders if she's living with one racist and one homophobe? (Or just one racist? Or just one homophobe?) Or is it just her—is it something about her presence that kills the mood? Is it boring to eat tagines when you're twenty-three, are they embarrassed on her behalf? And if she wasn't here, would they both be cracking jokes in a trendy bar, and playing beer pong, and forgetting she existed?

Before she cries, she goes to the bathroom.

Nothing is said for a minute. Moeiz stops eating bread and allows himself to feel sickly full. Joni Mitchell is singing and although Conner

doesn't recognise the song, he is prepared to bet that whatever needs to be said between them is in the lyrics.

Then he decides to be the adult.

'Well, this is weird.' Conner says it with nervous laughter, like an offering. Moeiz's right leg is pumping away under the table. He's rubbing his stomach.

'Yep.'

'Shall we talk about this, or...?'

'Sure.' He leans back so that his eyes are trained on the ceiling.

'Ok.' Conner makes himself count to five before adding, with audible patience, 'when?'

'Dunno. I'm kinda busy.'

'Uh-huh, uh-huh.' Mo's high-vis uniform. His cyclist's musk. The way Conner whimpered—shit, he can hear himself doing it. 'When are you next free?'

Moeiz lets out a groan, which might be indigestion or something else. He lowers his gaze from the ceiling to the table, and his eyes dart off to the side, as if there is a great deal of labour involved in answering this question.

'Next Sunday, maybe.' Today is Sunday.

'Ok. Sounds good.' This feels to Conner like progress—minute, achingly slow progress. 'Let's not make this any weirder than it is already.'

'Peace.'

'Peace' would have been an opportune moment for Lydia to re-enter. If this were a sitcom, she'd have waltzed in and mistaken the tail-end of their conversation for her cue. ('Make what any weirder?') Then Moeiz and Conner would have exchanged looks of panic (which, for some reason, she wouldn't be able to see), before spinning her some off-the-cuff BS ('Weirder? Nooo, I said wider...'), leading, ultimately, to entertaining consequences.

But Lydia doesn't come back for another five minutes, because that's how long it takes for her to stand before the mirror and force the tears welling in her eyes back into their ducts. It's a surprisingly hard and time-consuming business, reversing a decision to cry; she did, briefly, consider getting it all out in one go, to save time, but she also has a strong feeling that she would be crying about nothing. Instead, she's decided to tell them how she is feeling.

She treads downstairs quietly, then hangs back to hear: the entirety

of 'Gypsy' by Fleetwood Mac; a riffle of papers; someone getting up and going into the kitchen for ice, then returning to their seat; a cough; a throat-clearing; a yawn; a fork clattering on the floor and being returned to a plate. What she sees, on entering, is that Moeiz has moved his chair over to the window with its back to Conner and is there flicking through an A2 pad. Conner is sat sideways on his chair, facing away from the doorway where she's standing, with his left arm hanging over the back and his attention entirely absorbed in something in his right hand, presumably his phone.

'Can I just say—Alexa, *stop*.'

They turn around.

'Can I just say.' She hates being confrontational, has to inhale deeply first. 'You're making me sad. Goodnight.'

She goes upstairs to bed, repeating 'goodnight' when they call her name. The guilt keeps both men where they are for a while. Mo stares at the blank page the pad fell open on when she came in. Conner leaves his phone untouched on the table, his Instagram feed looping through a 10-second Simpsons clip.

Soberly, without speaking or making eye contact, they clear away the table. They cover the bowls of salad and bread with cling film and put them in the fridge. They scrape the tagine into Tupperware boxes and put these on the shelf below, leaving the earthenware dishes to soak in the sink. They put the dressings and seasonings where they think they would go. Conner washes the plates and while he smokes in the back garden, only the glow of his cigarette visible from the kitchen window, Moeiz dries and puts them away. When Moeiz isn't looking, Conner finishes the leftover prosecco.

When they're done cleaning up, Conner collapses into an armchair with his eyes closed.

'We should talk,' he says, eventually, slurring slightly. 'I feel terrible.'

Moeiz is already upstairs in his room, smoking a joint to help him sleep.

Arooj Anwar



Arooj Anwar is many things: an artist, fashionista, foodie, shoe addict, Friends fanatic, but above all, a lover of language and as a teacher, she shares this love with teenagers who repeatedly ask what the relevance is of studying Shakespeare's sonnets. She studied a degree in English Literature at The University of Manchester and completed the Teach First programme. She then worked as a university careers advisor, before deciding to pursue her passion for poetry through the MA in Creative Writing at The University of Manchester.

Her poetry reflects the silent moments of everyday lives and stories, told through the lens of a British-Pakistani-Muslim woman navigating her way through life, in the hope that a stranger somewhere will read her work and connect with it.

'Poetry isn't just written to be read; it's made to be felt.'

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Paper Renaissance

Paper makes a comeback
on the walls of those who dream in wonder,
neat blocks of meticulous
black and white words,

lines across meshed sheets.

Working hands commemorate their
contribution, through tea stains and accidental
paint scratches on edges,
messy grains of unevenness.

Blue-tac leaves rounded stains
on the posters hanging in bedrooms:
the boy band fanatics,
the movie star idealists; the superheroes.

It provides solitude, to those who want to escape
into remnants of places that once were.
If you're a dreamer, come in. If you're a wisher,
a liar, a pretender, a hoper, a pray-er, come.

Its crisp concaves will keep your secrets:
through lines, narrow-ruled,
through the plain versions of 100gsm,
through those colours, an iridescent
spectrum of pastels and brights.

But black and blue pen blotches seep through
pages and reveal the years that have passed in its bark,
k a l e i d o s c o p e s of other lives.

A.A.

I am the child of an immigrant.

I'm the one here to steal your job, a multilingual masterpiece,
shalwar kameez with Jimmy Choos, a pasta bake with too much chilli powder.

I am a Muslim.

The dirty terrorist here to blow you up, the call to prayer five times a day,
the fasting and the furious once a year, mates with Adam and Eve, oh and Jesus too.

I am a survivor of a 'broken home.'

Age of seven, questioned by the police, those brown envelopes from HMRC,
45-minute school walks in torrential rain—coming home to Asda Smart Price beans.

I am a woman.

Rape whistles and car key shanks, ignoring cat-calls from dodgy white vans,
saying no and no and no again—'But aren't you going to let me have any fun?'

I am a teacher.

Red pen on the whiteboard and gold stars in their books.
Alliteration and rhymes running free, 'Miss! Miss! I really need a wee!'

And if all else perished and nothing remained, I'd still be part of the
'No, not even water' crew—still a two-mile walk to school,
and when someone asks me what I am, I'll have to say that '*I am a poet.*'

A Series of Unfortunate Events

Gated garden, hidden hedges and plum trees.
 Bridal bouquets, white veil. Ann Summers, silk, lace—leather.
 Tickles. Cold hands, burning skin. Shared bed, pulling the duvet.
 Morning kisses—French. Post-shower towel song and dance.
 Crisp white shirt, the blue dress. Oh, that blue dress.
 The happy couple: framed. Post-work naps. The bloody naps.

Tea-time TV: *Only Fools and Horses*, *Friends*, *Friday Night Dinner*.
 Laughter and lunacy. Enchiladas and nachos; extra guacamole.
 No chicken and mushroom pie—he doesn't like the pastry I use.
 'My mum is on the phone.' Words mouthed—'pretend I'm not here.'
 Paper plates for him and the red floral ones from Dunelm for me.
 'Let's eat at my mum's tonight; it's been a while.' I do as I'm told.

Tesco; I travel further to get there—he doesn't like Asda.
 Crying in the fruit and vegetable aisle. Approach the front door.
 Breathe. One step, two steps, smile, kiss—flinch later.
 'I told you I'm not going to your mum's!' Smashed vase—
 flinch again. Four hours. Driving alone every other weekend, M6 tolls.
 'Why doesn't he visit?'—I avoid eye contact and the truth.

Anxiety attack: tears, bin, vomit. He mimics me as I suffer.
 'Are you going to sulk or are you coming back to bed?'
 I still do as I'm told. Cold hands, burning skin.
 Taunts, mimics, fights—doors light; slammed heavy.
 A diamond ring put back; white box, satin bow—
 subdued laughter, 'Don't be oversensitive.'

A Decade in the Making

I.

I saw you today for the first time. You had one foot against the wall
outside Primark on Market Street where the trams circled.

My feet touched the platform: ballet pumps

flared coat black lace dress lipstick—

that came off as soon as you noticed me.

II.

I saw you today. We sat and planned; walk-in closet for all my shoes,
en-suite bathroom for your morning shower and shave. And the kitchen table,
the kitchen table—me, you, Maya, Isaac.

We sat across your mother for the first time,

‘Those chairs are for our future kids,’ you whispered.

Face suddenly crimson, your leg slapped playfully.

III.

When I saw you next,

you were smiling in a photo I stumbled across,

sitting next to a bride who wasn’t me.

She would now have to pretend to laugh

at your jokes, sit with you at that kitchen table,

and I an anecdote you tell

of your foolish youth.

IV.

I saw you again today. Tan line on your fourth finger,

a little less hair on your head—some greys in mine.

‘Round 2?’ you smirked.

Sharp exhale eyes rolled fists clenched.

Worn out windows of my primary school

reflecting your grin.

‘Get your foot off my car.’

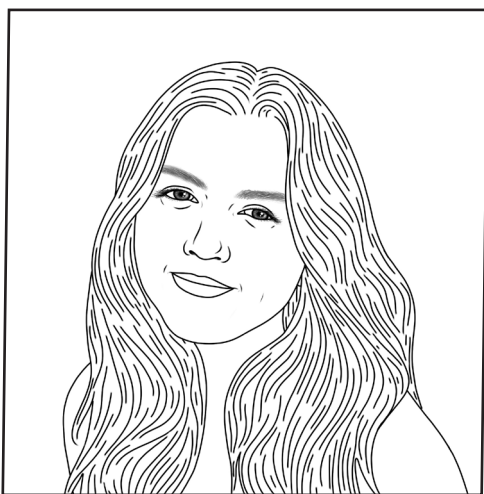
The Chapel

There's something about those rows and rows of rickety old chairs, the ones with the uncomfortable metal back rests and barely any padding; they aren't used for Sunday mass anymore. Maybe it's the faultless maroon, bumpy carpet that has witnessed so much, just like these never-ending walls. Mary and Jesus stand majestic, stained glass windows – primary reds, secondary greens; those autumn ambers, in rough panes, some smooth, some blurred, but all letting in the faint light from the moon outside; the sound of the birds eventually speaking to me in their foreign tongues.

But I continue to sit in this place, on those same rickety chairs, thinking of how this chapel is no longer a sanctuary for the insane; it's exercise classes twice a week – yoga and aerobics, late nights spent playing cards and ordering fried chicken at 3am – secrets told, in those post-midnight 'chats about life.' Faded yellow paint and specs of glitter on the once spotless carpet from making our own impromptu birthday banners; scattered memories of learning how to play a piano ballad, Adele, Someone Like You, taught to me by a Palestinian Californian engineer.

The wedding march that blared from the speakers some years ago still appears through masses of annual photos that hang on carte blanche walls; decades of memories soak into faces of pictures; and soon, I too, will be another face on the wall for generations to come and wonder about; hidden in those washed-out velvet curtains that are almost too heavy to draw, faded into ombre from the sunlight that shines through gaps in broken roof tiles that let in the wind; even these industrial radiators from the 60's can't eliminate the chill that lingers in the air sometimes.

Isabelle Connolly



Isabelle Connolly is a young aspiring writer from a small town in the North-west of England. Her work explores the intricacies of trauma, the family unit, morality, existence and place. She likes to examine the dark side of humanity and the façade of normality that we accept as day-to-day life. She is inspired by literature, music, art, film and nature. Isabelle is currently completing her MA in Creative Writing at the University of Manchester and working on a novel examining cults and the corruption of the individual.

The extract featured here is the opening chapter of a non-fiction piece Isabelle is writing for her dissertation. *The Edge of America* is a coming of age story analysing mental health and the obligations to family, place and nation. Looking at Florida as a microcosm of American society, Isabelle investigates the complexities and contradictions in the places she has seen.

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The Edge of America

Six sleeping pills, three hours sleep and fourteen hours into an eighteen-hour journey. It was early in the evening, and Miami was exploding with colour. I gazed up at the tall buildings painted in bright turquoise and sunset pink. In the palm trees, small green parrots jumped from tree to tree. I observed one balcony of an apartment block as our rental car paused at a red light. A young woman was sitting on a chair, dark shiny hair tied back, denim shorts, and a sheer top. Her arms were thin, folded across her chest. She was too far away to make out the fine details of her face, but I could see that she was looking straight ahead at something. A small brown dog lay by her feet. Something about the brief tranquillity of this moment has lingered in my mind ever since. As the light turned green, we left the girl behind and went further into the city. We didn't plan to stay in Miami. We were going to a place called Key West.

Condo blocks and hotels lined the beach, rising up so tall they appeared to skim the border of heaven; they seemed to be never-ending, so thick and impenetrable they formed a distorted wall; the beach beyond was hidden. The only glimpses of its beauty came in sun-soaked intervals when one building ended and another began. My brain swelled with pain. When we'd set off from Manchester Airport that afternoon, my reality had felt hazy and senseless, my mind cut adrift. The hours that followed had felt unreal and impersonal, unfolding in fragments. Mum looked back at me from the front passenger seat and smiled. She'd already made herself at home in our car, kicking off her sandals and resting her bare feet on the dashboard. The car's AC unit was deceptive, wrapping us in cool serenity while outside the subtropical sun was in full power. I felt like a replica of myself, as if the fractured pieces of my personality had been roughly shoved back together for a few hours in order to appear normal, to appear stable for

my family's sake. That's the magic word, isn't it: *stability*—the key to adulthood and independence. Stability had been an unreachable destination over the last two years; in fact, it seemed to be floating further from my grasp with every new day that unravelled before me. The promise of stability was elusive. I was beginning to understand that it was not meant for me.

The six sleeping pills the night before our flight had not been the plan. They were the last resort for my panic and exhaustion. Alone in my room, drenched with silence, the drip of time washed over me like Chinese water torture. Eventually, I had summoned the courage to look at my phone. 3.15 am. *Fuck*. Our flight was at 12 pm, we needed to be at the airport at least three hours before; our taxi was ordered for 8 am, so I needed to be up for 7 am-ish. If I fell asleep at that very moment, I could have about four hours of sleep.

But of course, I didn't.

Just stop thinking about it. You'll sleep then, I thought.

At this point, I'd already had at least four sleeping pills with no effect. I'd built up a tolerance, you see. Years of relying on sleeping pills had changed me.

At 3.55 am, I gave in and flicked on the bedside lamp, letting my room thump alive with pale yellow light—I laid a blue pill on my tongue and swallowed. The sharp, acidic flavour lingered on my tastebuds as finally, I was relinquished from the cold grip of reality and allowed to slip into that dark, cushiony unconsciousness I'd been waiting for.

But I was here now, still awake and still tired, breathing in the warm air of America. The place I longed to be for ten and a half months of every year. The place that stained my childhood memories with the honeyed glow of nostalgia and appeared in all my dreams. My brother and I have been vacationing in Florida since we were infants. I was eight months old the first time I came. It's always been a fantasy to us. A fantasy life we've been able to construct for six weeks of every year during summer, where we leave our real lives for something better, brighter and more beautiful. Even from a young age, I knew it was not real and could never be permanent, and the version of our family that existed here was a dream. A dream that could never be tangible, no matter how convincing at the time. My brother was next to me in the backseat of the car. His well-rested and vibrant spirit was palpable, inspiring me to get it together: act normal, act stable. The concealer beneath my eyes made me look a lot better than I felt, but a closer inspection revealed

a myriad of red veins threading from the brim of my eyes to the iris, giving them a cloudy, stoned glow. My brain was tinged with numbness, only half present, but it didn't matter. I'd take that.

The chunky Art Deco buildings that marked South Beach were simply stunning. Skinny palm trees wound up towards the sky decorated with neon lights. But among the masses of people with dark tans and tiny outfits who danced in and out of the fancy bars, I saw some of the saddest sights of my life.

So many people, men mainly, covered in dirt, dirty clothes, dirty hair. Shuffling through the crowd like zombies, arms outstretched, eyes frantic. We stopped at another red light, and I looked out of the window to see a black man knocking on car windows, a basket of flowers in his hand. No one rolled down their windows. I didn't blame them. There was a feeling of desperation that permeated everything here, and the glamour and opulence of Miami couldn't hide it. As we drove further out of the city, it became clear that this was not a place you'd want to stop your car and take a look around. The poverty here was so profound it had become dangerous. I saw a dog wandering along the pavement. It looked thin but fierce, loveless, and afraid.

The people there were predominantly African American and Hispanic, perched on fences and porches outside of houses that appeared to be abandoned but were most likely their homes. Children there walked like adults, self-assured, with hard faces. This was a place where society as I knew it didn't exist, not because the people here wanted to live without it, but because they weren't welcome to it. They'd been forgotten by a system that didn't want them, a system that favours white people with green paper.

We stopped at a motel in Marathon Key, one of the Florida Keys leading up to Key West. By this point, we'd been travelling for around eighteen hours. That night I fell asleep to the lively cries of the cicadas outside my window and the familiar taste of sleeping pills; in shame and frustration, I fumbled through my travel bag—my movements obscured by darkness. I was sharing a room with my brother and didn't want to wake him, or more accurately, I didn't want him to suspect how precariously tethered I was to the person he knew. Relief washed over me, calming my senses as my fingers glided against that thin plastic packet of blue pills.

Lemony sunlight surged through the sheer curtains. An AC unit shivered against the wall. The wilting odour of stale chemicals, cheap

air freshener to mask any trace of the strangers who had occupied the room before. An old, ugly carpet. The trickle of unfamiliar voices outside the window. My brother was asleep in the single bed across from mine. I felt much better than the day before, almost like a different person, although my existence still felt rinsed and muted by the sleeping pills.

The heat was overpowering as I opened the door, inciting a feeling not dissimilar to claustrophobia. I had a swim in the pool before we set off again; the silky water soothed my already burning skin and calmed me. Dad was sitting on a deck chair surrounded by maps while Mum lay next to him, still as a corpse, spread across the flimsy deckchair, sunbathing.

‘Hope you’ve got sun cream on!’ I shouted.

She responded that she had, but I didn’t believe her. She was always on the quest for the perfect tan, no matter the risk. By the end of our holiday, she had a tan that rivalled even the most seasoned Florida residents.

A small white boat pulled into the wooden dock that the motel’s pool overlooked. A group of four hopped out, wearing sunglasses and baseball hats. They were white, but their skin was almost the colour of red clay. Immediately, they began unloading what appeared to be hundreds of live lobsters onto the deck. The lobsters were the size of a grown man’s forearm; light brown and speckled with white spots, thick whiskers protruded from the face. The people bound their claws and legs with tape and counted them. So many lined up, piled up. When they were done, the sun-bleached deck was dark with seawater.

‘A lot of lobsters you’ve got there,’ my mum remarked.

‘It’s Lobster Mini-Season!’ a couple of them called over, flashing us two platinum grins.

Just what they did with their spoils from the ocean, I do not know, but they seemed pretty happy. Still, with a recent study finding that after just two days of the Lobster Mini-Season, the lobster population of the Florida Keys had decreased by 95%, it’s hard to justify it as a light-hearted tradition.

The only way to drive to Key West is Ocean Highway, which consists of one very long road. The road connects each of the Keys, which are really small islands surrounded by the world’s most beautiful water. It’s clear blue, turquoise, and white in places, mottled with dark blue patches of seaweed. The sunlight that scatters across it is so bright you have to wear sunglasses to avoid straining your eyes. I looked out

of the window and saw a father and daughter playing in waist-high water. It looked like heaven.

The traffic seemed suspended in time; if we moved at all, I didn't feel it. With no alternative route, we stopped at Sombrero Beach, a thin strip of pale gold that curved around the shore in the shape of a boomerang. The sand was as fine as powdered sugar, infiltrating my sandals and covering my toes. The sun rose in the sky and moved across it like a giant golden vagabond. I felt my body being nourished by its warmth and light, my hair, my skin, my bones. We didn't stay long.

The leather scalded my bare thighs as I sat in the backseat of the car. But I felt better already; I was, in that moment, two people and no one. I was the smiling little girl in the photo frames at my family's house. The cute rosy-cheeked child that my parents would give their lives for. And I was the little girl dealing with some bleak mental health issues as a university student in a new city, self-medicating with sleeping pills and various other substances. The girl who partied too much and drank too much. The girl who was reckless, self-destructive, and careless with her own life. The girl who could endure twenty-four hours without sleep, pacing up and down her single room as the lonely mutterings of sirens and taxis throughout the night were replaced by the chaotic barrage of construction work, tangled voices, and car horns when the clock hit 7 am. Hearing the world moving around her, shuddering through her walls while she stayed the same.

We arrived at Key West in the afternoon, dropped our bags off at the apartment we were renting and set off to explore. Deep cracks scarred the roads and sidewalks, evidence of the sun's unrelenting power. The streets were lined with some of the strangest trees I'd ever seen. The Banyan trees were intricate, almost grotesque in the way they resembled human arteries. The Kapok tree had roots taller than me (I'm 5 ft 5) that burst forth out of the ground like some mythical creature. And, of course, palm trees everywhere.

The town centre shimmered with light and life. There were several drag show bars on Duval Street. The stars of such shows hung outside the bars, smoking cigarettes like Audrey Hepburn and wearing dresses like Marilyn Monroe. The Latin music was intoxicating as we walked past one bar called The Green Parrot. A couple started dancing in the street beneath the cool neon green lights. It appeared to be spontaneous, but they had the skill of professionals. Two bikes leaned against a bike bench, unchained. This was the kind of place where people trusted

each other. Men walked around wearing cowboy hats unironically. And almost everyone was carrying a large plastic jug with the name ‘Sloppy Joe’s.’ We decided we must go to Sloppy Joe’s and see what the deal was. It’s such a small town centre that it takes no longer than ten minutes to arrive at any destination you desire.

Sloppy Joe’s was a sight. The wall behind the bar was stacked with machines containing fluorescent alcoholic slush. I watched my dad’s face harden as he regarded the menu—\$10.25 for one drink.

‘Come on, we’re leaving,’ he said. ‘What’s the American version of a Wetherspoons?’

‘Hooters?’ my brother ventured.

‘Nice try,’ my mum frowned.

That evening we dined at a seafood restaurant on Duval Street, where almost all of Key West’s glorious nightlife is situated. A tropical neon wonderland filled with colourful people having a good time. The earthy fragrance of Cuban cigars stained the air, and impassioned covers of Johnny Cash and John Mellencamp floated on the humid breeze. We walked past one bar called Willie T’s; every inch of it was covered with money. Dollar bills smelling of beer flapped beneath ceiling fans.

The tradition is that every guest must staple a dollar bill before they go. It isn’t compulsory, but layers and layers of dollar bills have amassed over the years. The walls beneath are no longer visible. It’s hard to guess the grand total if each strip of sage coloured paper was counted. I wouldn’t be surprised if it reached over \$1,000. Key West is a party town for the wealthy, famed for its relaxed, carefree lifestyle, an existence available only to those who can afford it; nowhere was this more evident than when looking at those green dollar bills. My mind strayed back to Miami. The homeless, the poor—as unnoticed as shadows on the pavement, and I wondered, is it really more appealing to staple your spare cash to a wall than to give it to another human being?

My family and I could afford only one week of the Key West lifestyle. I spent our remaining days in sun-drenched bliss. The sun had tinted my dark blonde hair gold, laced with strands of platinum. My skin became tender from mild sunburn, shaded in hues of caramel. When I imagined myself back in Manchester, England, I felt afraid.

One evening, I sat on the pier, the briny taste of saltwater on my lips and adrenaline coursing through my veins. I’d just been stalked by

a 6-foot barracuda while snorkelling and promptly fled from the sea. I looked out at my dad, a mere dot in the distance, completely unaware and too far away to warn. My mum and brother were elsewhere, cycling on the island. There was no telling when Dad might swim back, so I decided to get up and explore. I walked along the beach for ten minutes, then came across another pier adjacent to the one I had just left. A small sign informed me I was at the site of the Key West AIDS Memorial.

During the 1980s, the AIDS crisis dramatically affected this small speck of an island, with cases equal to or greater than cities like New York and San Francisco. Key West has been a haven for the LGBTQ community since the 1970s. These people undertook an estimate of 70% of the town's restoration effort. The island's decaying Old Town was revitalised into one of the most astonishing historic districts in the United States; the efforts resulted in Key West being added to the list of places protected and preserved under the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 2005. Currently, one-third of Key West's population identifies as LGBTQ. When you get here, you understand why. The streets are free of the prejudices that poison many places. It's almost like being in a utopic microcosm of what the world could be...

My hair was now dry from the sun's warmth. I felt the prickle of sunburn on my back and a jolt of sickness in my tummy. Over a thousand names are carved into that black granite floor. The limit is 1,500. I walked around the perimeter and tried to imagine each life, who there were, what they might have looked like. But there were too many.

Dad was waiting for me in the car. We stopped for a few minutes before driving away and watched the sunset fill the sky with blushing colour. It was frighteningly beautiful. Frightening in the way that it was so shockingly vast that it reminded me of my own mortality. And beautiful in the way that I couldn't take my eyes off it. We were forced into silence as we regarded each shift in colour and trail of darkened cloud. I'm not religious, but for a brief moment, I searched for something.

Edward Heathman



Edward Heathman grew up in South Wales and came to Manchester when he was eighteen to study for a BA in English Literature with Creative Writing. He writes fiction and poetry, and has been published on Ink, Sweat & Tears and in The Buzzin Bards 2020 Poetry Anthology.

His poetry plays with form and the fun to be had in language, while holding small moments up to the light. His fiction is psychological and sounds out individual voices as they try to overcome the challenges in their lives.

He is currently working on two novels. One is set in Underwood, a settlement near Newport in South Wales, and follows a teenage girl as she tries to build a future for herself while dealing with a troubled mother. The other, which is included here, is about two friends who meet at university through the LGBT+ Society.

He also runs a YouTube channel called Gagging4Lit, where he talks about books.

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Behaviour Management

The morning comes so gently you miss it.
The growling of kettles, the ushering blue.
All the world's intangible transit.

The shower water making its orbit
down the drain. The washing-up left to do.
The morning comes so gently you miss it.

The retired, industrious again on their feet,
letting out the cat, buying freshly printed news.
All the world's intangible transit.

The car engines starting up, unfit
for the frost. The letters flapping through.
The morning comes so gently you miss it.

The unanswered call from work. Commit.
The schoolkids yawning for classes, too.
All the world's intangible transit

waits at the foot of your bed for you to claim it.
So take it in your hands and sip its truth.
The morning comes so gently you miss it.
All the world's intangible transit.

Canal St

Every queen must rise to the occasion
when the summoning basses thump the night
and the flags are out on their masts,
flying their flying colours so gregariously.
They must beat their faces to the gods,
keep alert to the cobbles under heels
(oh, she walks in beauty). Those bitches
bat their lashes at the barmen, stay clear of the rain,
dress how they wish, as long as it's fabulous.
Take in the waterways, still throughout this ruddy city,
leading them here to your festering queendoms—
New Union, The Eagle, AXM, Napoleons,
Vanilla, G-A-Y, Churchills, Richmond Tea Rooms,
New York New York, Company Bar, Cruz 101,
Alter Ego, The Molly House, The Thompson's Arms.

Dog Days and Dallying

1

My parents stood me in front of the halls' outer doors to take the picture. I looked off towards the other side of the L-shaped block while my dad fumbled with his phone. Left-open curtains exposed the vacant rooms, bare walls yet to gather posters. The car park in the middle of the grid of buildings was nearly deserted even this late in the afternoon.

'Smile then!' Dad said.

As usual, I made the least effort to do what he asked and gave the blankest possible smile. I could feel the sweat collecting around the seam of the t-shirt, right under my armpits. It didn't help that I was wearing my navy cardigan as well, on a warm September day; the sleeves covered my scrawny arms, and I thought the heavy knitted fabric made me look less foolish.

We'd not long finished unpacking the essentials up on the fourth floor and had argued over the particulars—Dad insisted on scribbling my name in permanent marker on any piece of equipment I'd brought with me so that the iron, the bedside lamp, the bottom of my laptop all said EDD on them.

'They'll take everything,' he'd warned.

'I think I'd know if it's my iron or not.'

'No you won't, you won't,' he'd said, red-faced, squeaking the pen across the plastic handle.

Mum sat on the cheap leather sofa with her hands out as if feeling for rain.

Back in the car park, she turned her face away from me and took in the spring mattress that had been left to sag against one of the dumpsters. From the way she clicked her tongue, I could tell it was me

she was disappointed with. *You drive your son halfway up the country you carry his things up flights and flights of stairs and pay for everything and he can't even smile for a photo...* I was certain that's what she was thinking, right then.

But I couldn't do it. I hadn't the slightest inkling, and I always followed my instincts.

'Or don't smile,' Dad said, putting his phone back in his pocket. 'It's going on Facebook either way.'

Afterwards, we spent a good forty minutes walking up and down the strip of Manchester's Curry Mile because Mum wanted to find the place we'd eaten in when we came to check out the university the previous March. That restaurant had been dark and narrow, and fish tanks lined the walls. We couldn't find it this time, so in the end we settled on the one with wide welcoming windows and curved booths.

Waiting to order our meals, I relaxed into the cold tingle of my Diet Coke. Dad scratched his knuckles against the short gingery goatee on his chin. Mum sighed quite happily over the menu. Sweat snailed its way down her temples. I saw how bloodshot her eyes were, even now while they were half-closed, and considering the single dish she always chose, those burst capillaries were there stretching out their red worries.

Last time we visited it had been just her and me. I'd been invited to an open day for the small number of students who'd successfully made it on to the combined English Literature and Creative Writing course. It had felt wonderful seeing that email come through on the screen in the Sixth Form computer cluster, like I'd been sent a backstage pass. These were only conditional offers, of course. And for me at least, the chances of actually getting onto the course had seemed very slim.

My trip with Mum had been made in the wake of that delight. The long double line of restaurants had brimmed with a holiday zeal, then. Even the older neo-gothic buildings around the main campus seemed to harbour it. Sitting there in the restaurant while Mum and Dad ordered their food, I thought about a girl I'd tagged along with last year from my Religious Studies class. She'd been one of the *high* high achievers. Olive skin with a thatch of hair that sat around her head in the style of an open-faced motorcycle helmet. Once she told me she'd been 'so annoyed' when she saw that one B on her list of GCSEs. 'Eleven As,' she said, 'and one measly B.' I hadn't come close to that. It seemed silly to stress over grades when you usually only had to do alright to get to the next stage.

And then, on Results Day, I found her crying outside the front of the automatic doors. I hadn't gone in to get my brown envelope yet,

but I stopped and spoke to her, asking what was wrong. I'd already seen the notification on my UCAS homepage, so I wasn't fussed about my grades; I knew I'd got in. She'd needed all As for her first choice, Leeds, and she'd ended up with Bs and was having to go to Swansea.

I wondered how she would be feeling right now. I stared across at a couple two tables down who had their heads close together in conspirative talk. I felt like I'd stepped back from the edge of a platform and missed a train rushing past, inches from my face.

On the drive up, earphones in, I'd consigned myself to watching the fellow cars slipping past on the motorway, many of them full to the brim with duvets, boxes of pots, pans and other student paraphernalia. I didn't say a word to my parents the whole way, other than when we stopped off at the services and a woman from a hen party in a pink wig stumbled past us mumbling to herself that she was 'over it.' Her friends dragged themselves after her. One of them said, 'Kelly, stop being a fanny.'

'Stop being a fanny!' That was what I said to them, in line at the Starbucks, once the hen party was out of earshot. Mum and Dad just shook their heads. Knowing I was moving away for a minimum of three years, I'd been trying to psyche myself up all year to tell them I was gay. I'd been out to some of my friends at Sixth Form for a good while, which had always left me feeling deceitful coming home on the bus at the end of the day, knowing I should tell them but unsure how, grim for not knowing *how to say it* when these were people who cared about me, who I knew would accept me either way.

Here in the booth, again I thought of saying it then and there, letting it out—like a fart! But that seemed equally graceless, and I became angry thinking about it... that it was me who had to make the move, as if it was my fault.

A silence grew between us on the table. I pushed my tongue against the roof of my mouth, across the back of my front teeth, trying to think of something to say. I was glad my brothers hadn't come with us. There wasn't enough room in the car anyhow, but at that moment in the restaurant, I did miss them particularly. They were great to fall back on in times like this when I failed to join in, as it were. Sometimes I think I spent most of my childhood settled in the shadows of the gap between them, silent and alert.

'Are you happy with the room?' Mum asked.

'Yep.'

‘Good,’ Dad grunted, amidst tomatoey mouthfuls. ‘It’ll be nice to have an en-suite,’ I said. I imagined I’d only be able to shower at four in the morning or some crazy time like that if I’d had to share communal showers on a floor with other people.

My flatmates weren’t due to arrive for a few days, which pleased me to no end. It meant that even if I clammed up when I met them, I could affect a sort of ease, knowing my things were already there, as though it was my life they were coming into.

‘What are you doing tonight?’ Mum said, scraping her plate.

‘Not sure.’

‘We thought you might like to come with us to that Wetherspoons later. We could have a little drink?’

My parents were forever offering me ‘little drinks’ since I’d turned eighteen, thinking it would loosen me up.

‘There’s a Fresher’s thing at the Student Union. I’ll go to that, if I’m not too tired, if that’s okay.’

‘Good thing it’s only up the road from you, eh?’ Dad said.

‘I can’t get lost,’ I said, returning a weak smile.

I unpacked everything when I got back to my room. Mum and Dad had gone to check into their hotel behind the hospital. They were making something of a mini-break from my departure. I thought I’d read and settle down for the night once I’d finished sorting things into their places, but after making my bed and decorating the wardrobe (I stuck pictures of things I’d drawn from stories or poems or songs I liked all over it), I was worked-up from the exercise and knew I wouldn’t sleep for hours and hours. The late sun flared pink across the window as I arranged the things on the desk. The car-tops below glinted in the light, and it seemed I was viewing the room from very far away, as if through a submarine periscope. This would be where my notepad would go, I thought, these shelves will be where my pile of books shall sit and grow as the year goes on. And I would be here somewhere, of course.

Then it was dark, and I’d completed my quickfire workout routine of weights, sit-ups, press-ups, planks and squats. I don’t think it even took ten minutes to do. I used the two-kilogram dumbbells I stole from the back of my younger brother’s wardrobe a couple of years before. He’d moved up to ‘proper’ weights soon after buying them to compete with the rest of his rugby team, so I’d known he wouldn’t miss them.

After I'd shaved and showered, I dried my hair with the hairdryer and fingered my fringe into place, scrutinizing myself in the tight bathroom mirror. I smeared my face with Sudocrem; a practice I'd started recently, hoping it would do something for my stubborn acne. I saw something flicker under the cistern and stayed still, holding my breath. A few seconds later, the flicker returned. A silverfish. I'd never seen one before. I checked over the rest of the bathroom to see if there were more but couldn't find any. By then, it had disappeared again, as if it never was. Thinking no more about it, I got dressed, eager to leave.

Natalya Edwards



Natalya Edwards resides in the ethereal land of the Wirral, just outside of Liverpool. She completed a History BA at the University of Sheffield before studying Creative Writing at Manchester.

When she's not falling down strange internet rabbit holes or walking her dog, she writes flash fiction, short stories and hopefully a novel someday if she can find the gumption. She has featured on the NFFD 2021 blogpage and is currently writing a short story collection exploring womanhood, the body, surgery and trauma.

Ghost Directory is an abridged version of a standalone short story.

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Ghost Directory

(abridged)

1. Five years, ten months and a day before. We're sitting in your back garden eating ice cream.

It was the day before I was leaving for university and you'd asked me to come over. It was just like every other time I'd come over that summer. The two of us, sitting on the small patch of grass at the back of your garden, drinking bottles of Strawberry and Lime Kopparberg cider and eating ASDA's own Neapolitan ice cream straight from the tub, a spoon each.

Just before I left, I told you I was scared.

Scared of what?

That we won't be friends anymore.

You told me I was being paranoid, that we'd been friends for six years *why would a little distance change anything?* I couldn't explain it because it wasn't something I had been thinking about, it was a feeling, really. There was a space between us, and it wasn't just the physical space I had made so I was no longer in the direction of your cigarette smoke.

I had this strange ache in my stomach. Like there was some entity at the bottom clenching and twisting up my stomach lining. I wanted to see if, maybe, you felt it too. But, your nonchalant shrug and dismissive short laugh, well, that was enough to tell me you didn't get it. This fear of tomorrow, of losing today, didn't touch you at all. You were too busy looking forwards to consider what you might be leaving behind.

2. Five years and ten months before. First night of Fresher's week.

I am standing in the alcohol aisle in Tesco's with a flatmate. We had been invited to a Pre's in a flat on the floor below us and neither of us had even thought to pack alcohol. I stared bewildered at the rows of cheap wine.

The flatmate told me to get a spirit, she said *it's better for getting wast-*

ed. She asked me what I drank and I blurted out *Vodka* before I could even properly think about it. It was the first spirit I'd drank. You'd stolen a bottle from your parent's alcohol cabinet during a sleepover when we were fourteen.

The flatmate dared me to take a shot outside of Tesco. I did.

Immediately, I was fourteen again. Shoting vodka from the cap, pretending I couldn't feel the disgusting burn it ignited. Telling you, *yeah, it's alright*, so you thought I was cool.

3. Five years and five months before. I'm in a 24-hour off-licence, drunk.

Over the past few months, I'd become one of those girls who lingers in the smoking area outside clubs, begging people for cigarettes. I had about a 50% success rate and a growing nicotine addiction. Then, finally, one guy said to me *just buy them yourself you cheap bitch*. So, I did.

The short bald man behind the counter smiled.

What can I get you, love?

I scoured my brain for cigarette brands before asking him if he sold yours. I watched him roll back the screen and retrieve a recognisable plain white packet with an image of a blackened lung printed on the top.

He also asked if I had a lighter. I didn't, so I bought that too.

I stood outside the shop, watching the ever-growing line for the club, and lit the cigarette.

Maybe it felt even more intense because I was drunk, or because for the first time I could taste it as well as smell it. I had never actually smoked your brand before.

Suddenly, I am standing outside a social club with you. It's the start of our final year at sixth form, we're at a friend-of-a-friend's 18th birthday. You are telling me about the latest guy you are seeing.

You had taken his virginity and you were more than happy about it. He'd asked you how many men you'd slept with. You had given him a more than thorough answer.

I remember cutting you off as soon as the words left your mouth.

Wait, why would you tell him that? You said you'd never tell anybody.

It's fine! It was just a bit of fun we had once, I kind of like it now. It's like we're real best friends, closer than anyone else. And, he thought it was really hot... don't be like that, look it's fine, I trust him.

Well, I don't trust him, I've never even met him. Don't tell anyone else, okay?

You pursed your lips and stayed silent.

...*Who the fuck else have you told?*

The taste of the cigarette had twisted. The tar now clung to the back of my throat like a chemical lining. I pressed the ends of the cigarette against the wall until it crumpled in my fingers. Then, I dropped it on the floor, scuffing it against the heel of my trainer. In my slightly hysteric, drunken state I must have thought the more thoroughly I stubbed it out, the more thoroughly I would eradicate the memory.

I took the nearest cab I saw back to my accommodation.

4. Four years and five months before. I was out. Thankfully, I'd replaced cigarettes with sticking my tongue down a girl's throat.

She was beautiful. I don't even know how it happened. We made eye contact, maybe I smiled, and we were off.

I began to feel like I could see this moment. Like, I was watching it from afar, another body within the crowds that surrounded us. But I couldn't see her face, just mine. So, I pulled apart in an attempt to commit her face to memory. But when I looked at her, under the blaring club lights, all I saw was you.

Immediately, my arm grabbed her shoulder, pulling my lips to her ear. *Just need the toilet, sorry.*

Come back.

I didn't.

Next thing, I was squatting over the toilet, focusing on my breathing, trying to dissuade the tightness in my chest.

No more gingers.

Five minutes later, I found my friends. A part of me couldn't help but look around for her. She had either left, or she just didn't look like you anymore.

5. Four years and four months before. I just had sex, and I ruined it—I started crying.

Oh no, are you okay...was that your first time?

I choked out a laugh. *No, just ignore me. I'm pathetic.*

Tell me.

I've been with one woman before, back in school.

She shook her head, *oh dear, straight friend?*

Yeah, how'd you know?

She laughed. It's a *rite of passage!* Then, she kissed my cheek, her thick dark hair brushing against my bare elbow. It was strange, I no longer felt the suffocating concoction of yearning mixed in with an

aching fear of rejection. Instead, it was replaced with muted desire, laughter, and sleep. Her name is Tiya. You would have liked her.

6. Three years, seven months and a day before. I was home for a few days and met up with a mutual friend. As soon as I arrived at the pub, she told me you had dropped out.

What, seriously? She texted me, like, six months ago. She didn't even mention anything about Uni.

She explained how she had been clothes shopping in town. She went up to pay and there you were behind the till.

I asked what clothing shop it was.

Urban Outfitters.

You're kidding? You hated Urban Outfitters with a passion. Over-priced middle-class white girl shit I remember you calling it.

We talked about how inevitable it was that you dropped out. You never liked law. You didn't care enough. I thought you sold yourself on the idea of it from watching too many films where the defendant lawyer manages to save the wrongly accused through hours of meticulously searching through the small print, finding a loophole in the law. You thought you could be Atticus Finch, but an Atticus that manages to save Tom Robinson.

Jenna thought perhaps you had been pressured into it by your parents, or your teachers, but I knew you hadn't. Everyone at that age was easily influenced—myself included—but not you. I remember we had got in an argument once because I bought a top from Urban. You sent me tons of articles about how fast fashion was polluting the planet, abusing their workers. *It's just a trend piece. You've wasted your money; you'll hate it in a week.*

It was hard for you to understand a point of view that differed from your own. Maybe, that's why you thought you would make a great lawyer. Exuding only confidence and pure hard facts until you got your way.

I guess it hadn't all gone the way you intended.

7. Three years and seven months before. I did some shopping in town and temptation drew me into Urban Outfitters.

It was busy. Really busy. I intended to go in and say *hello* maybe *how are you?* something, anything, but you were rushed off your feet serving. You didn't even notice me; I suppose I must have blended in with every other person there.

I waited for the queue to die down. I entertained myself, running my hands through the racks of clothing, all slung on brown wooden hangers. It gave the illusion of quality, but all the fabric felt thin and stretchy, and when I looked down, I was met with a mountain of tops strewn across the floor.

You had your hair down. You always wore it in a tight bun at school, with a few loose tendrils of hair to frame your face. You hated wearing your hair down, you always joked how it was an untameable mane. *These curls refuse to abide to authoritative figures.*

I thought perhaps I had caught you on a bad day. Your skin looked chalky and your cheeks a little bloated. You weren't smiling.

The queue had gone now. I swallowed my spit and began to approach you. Suddenly, another girl appeared. I stopped and watched you serve her. You spoke only out of necessity and barely made eye contact. Then, as you passed the girl her receipt your eyes darted up and looked directly at me.

I was expecting a recognising smile, maybe even mouthing a hey or a small and awkward wave, anything. Instead, you held my gaze in a way that left me clueless to whether you were seeing me or seeing a ghost you'd locked in the closet.

As soon as you served her you turned around to speak to your co-worker. You seemed serious, deep in conversation. I took it as my cue to leave.

8. Seven months before. You were waiting outside the cinema for me, vaping.

I'd moved back home and recently started an internship in a publishing house. Then, I ran into you at a mutual friend's housewarming party.

You were different, calmer. You asked a lot of questions, so many I didn't have a chance to ask you any back. You left before midnight, but not without asking me if I wanted to go to the cinema with you the following week. The third instalment to a horror film we'd both loved was coming out. I lied and said I had seen the sequel. Instead, I watched it the night before we met up. I hated it.

The third film was just as bad. It was so incredibly boring I kept slipping my phone out of my pocket every ten minutes to check the time. Every time something ridiculously cliché happened I'd roll my eyes and look over to you to see if your reaction mimicked mine. But your eyes remained fixed to the screen, engrossed.

As we left the screening you asked if I remembered going with you the first time. I said yes, but I appeared to have a warped version of events because you started talking about a double date.

You don't remember? We came with James, my ex, and his mate. He was super into you, remember?

I clenched my teeth, remembering it now. That guy's hands. My upper thighs. Me rushing to the toilet slightly hysterical and begging you to come home with me.

Well, I couldn't leave James. Plus, the movie was good, it was worth it.

I remembered how I had returned to my seat. I had zipped up my coat so high the cool metal zipper touched my bottom lip. I kept my legs crossed and pressed my body into the chair. I waited until the moment the credits began to roll before jumping up and mumbling out some excuse before leaving immediately.

No, it was shit, Carey. Even that one was shit.

Well, sorry... You didn't have to come. I only asked because I thought you'd be interested.

I drove you home. The whole journey we spoke in pleasantries, the way you'd speak to your hairdresser.

As I dropped you outside of your parents' door you gave a tentative smile and mumbled a quick *see you* before you quietly unlocked the passenger door.

You unlocked your parents' front door under the porchlight. I waited, watching as the door opened and closed, you fumbled a little with the lock until you were eventually successful. I stayed until your shadow in the frosted glass disappeared, and the porchlight flicked off.

9. One month and three days before. You called me. I missed it.

It was 9 pm. I had just got home from drinks with a few friends from work. As soon as I unlocked the door, I ran to the toilet leaving the bathroom door wide open. It was only my partner who was in and after four years together we were on a disgusting level of comfortability.

I heard my phone buzzing away in my bag, I assumed it was my Mum. No one from our generation randomly calls each other.

It wasn't until I had a toothbrush in my mouth that I picked up my phone.

Five missed calls from Carey-Beary (Wifeey)

I cringed. My SIM card must have picked up the name from an old phone.

I called you back, forgetting I had a foaming mix of toothpaste and saliva in my mouth. It didn't matter, you didn't pick up anyway.

Holding my phone out in front of me I looked at your contact details. It had a photo of you from high school, in an ill-fitting white translucent blouse. You had a deadpan expression, holding up your middle finger to the camera. No makeup.

I locked my phone and went back to the sink to spit out the toothpaste. It had been about ten years since that photo had been taken, and yet you hadn't aged at all. Back then I saw you as so much more mature than me, with the alcohol, cigarettes, condoms. All these physical things you'd acquired to project your complete development into adulthood. We both perceived your fifteen year-old-self as fully formed—your personality set.

It was only as I was drifting off to sleep that I realised how dangerous that was.

10. One month before. Your mum called me. I picked up this time.

Hannah? It's Claire, Carey's mother.

I took a few seconds before replying. Something felt off. Your Mum had never called me. My stomach began pulsating.

I'm sorry. I have some bad news...

Her words washed over me, it all sounded so mechanical, rehearsed, as though she was reading from a pre-written note.

Carey went missing last weekend. We didn't think too much of it because she always would go off for a few days, stay at a friend's house. But her work called and said she hadn't turned up...have you been in contact with her at all? Any information would be so helpful.

I asked her what day you had last been seen. It was the day you had called me.

11. Today.

And that brings me to now. Well, earlier today. Your mother invited me to your funeral at the very last minute, I should have known then how hugely inadequate I would feel. When I entered the church, I was charged with an overwhelming feeling that I was trespassing on other people's grief. It was a hierarchy. Those closer to the front had a better title to claim you as theirs. Aunty. Cousin. Family friend.

I realised how much my relationship with you was fuelled by a horrible feeling that there was someone else, someone better, in front of me.

As the funeral progressed, I saw it wasn't just me who felt like that. Everyone I spoke to seemed so shocked, bewildered. There was a sentiment among everyone I spoke to of utter shock and dismay. *She seemed like such a strong girl. I never saw her upset, not once.*

I came home that evening, a little drunk from the open bar and opened up my laptop. I began to write a list of all the reoccurring memories I had of you to prove to myself that I did know you as intimately as I so badly wanted to.

As I was writing I began to realise how we'd moved past each other. You had been the antidote to a different version of myself; an incomplete version of myself. Perhaps I had been yours too. Or was I just telling myself that so I could sleep soundly tonight, knowing that if I'd answered that phone call I wouldn't have been any help to you anyway. Either way I still felt like a bitch.

My eyes finally released themselves from the screen the moment I typed the last word. I wanted to write more but everything seemed to get muddled on the page, all I had was these sporadic memories that even I couldn't completely make sense of. As I retired to bed, I told myself I would write a better one, to better comprehend how you haunted me all these years. For now, though, this is all I have.

Charlotte Maloney



Charlotte has been writing since childhood. During her undergraduate degree, she discovered that short stories were not only her forte, but much more than a hobby. She has attended writing workshops across the country, entered short story competitions and was delighted to have her Brontë-inspired piece read aloud in a Gaskell House event. Charlotte particularly enjoys exploring the complexities and nuances of interpersonal relationships—the MA has allowed her to lean into her strengths in unexpected and exciting ways. In terms of theme and style, she cites Gillian Flynn and Lionel Shriver as two crucial influences. Charlotte intends to move to Manchester in the near future, with a mind to be more closely connected to its thriving literary community.

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Catch

As newlyweds, we'd have the neighbours round for drinks. The conversation felt like an enactment of the school game Mums and Dads: 'How are the kids? Has Sophie mastered the potty yet?' They were nice enough but I didn't really care, and according to Cora, no offspring of theirs would amount to much. Once they'd left, we'd impersonate them, and it made us giddy—we'd fall about laughing, which turned us on. We were in our late twenties then but thought of ourselves as being in a suspended state of youth, and on top of that we had proper jobs and a nice flat. We didn't accept that adulthood had arrived. We never thought we'd start to yearn or feel the need for children, for one thing. It didn't seem like us. Although we did have Felicity, a little tabby cat, who more or less took care of herself.

There has always been a nastiness in Cora, of which I was aware from the beginning, but hoped wouldn't break through the surface more than it needed to. Being loving towards me in the traditional ways had never come naturally. I'd accepted that she was an Ice Queen when we met in a backstreet bar in Hemel Hempstead—I initially found it quite attractive, the elusivity, and I didn't mind her telling me I didn't suit blue, or that I should stop buying cheap shirts.

But after a few years, she'd had enough of dealing with me a particular way and changed tack.

'You look like shit,' she said one morning, working on a crossword.

Stopping dead in my tracks, all I could produce was a rather meek 'Why?'

'You just look unattractive,' she answered. 'You've really let yourself go.'

Is it the stubble? In an attempt to tease her, I sidled up and adjusted

my tie. 'I thought I was rugged? Do you prefer me clean-shaven?'

She looked me up and down as you would an unremarkable job candidate. 'I liked when you looked like the man I married.'

It stung. I'd never been anything special, but nothing much had changed, and I didn't think her attraction to me was dependent on presentation. 'Well...' I scrambled for words and remembered she'd had her hair done the day before. 'That haircut doesn't suit you.'

She didn't flinch. 'Your opinion is so immaterial it's hilarious.' Not looking up from her crossword, she stood slowly, and took it to the other room. Felicity observed me from the kitchen, ears flat against her head.

That was March. Many interactions of that nature ensued over the following months and, despite my burgeoning resentment, I didn't take long to give up on questioning and challenging her. By the summer, we were eating our meals mostly in silence, planning only cinema date nights with no dinner out afterwards so we didn't have to talk properly, hanging around that bit longer at work. Friendly exchanges were superficial and disagreements were fraught. We had the occasional day where everything just seemed natural, where we almost genuinely liked each other again. We'd lie in bed and listen to Blur or throw an assortment of snacks into the car and drive to a randomly selected destination. During those times all the rest seemed worth it, almost like it didn't matter.

'Do you remember the night we met?' Cora asked one blustery afternoon in Brighton, biting into a scotch egg, trying to find a comfortable position on the uneven ground. The weather report had been wildly inaccurate.

'Not really,' I joked.

'As if you could forget,' she said, gazing at the water.

I could see the bar clearly in my mind: her packet of pork scratchings reflecting the strobe lights, 'What Is Love' smothering what little either of us could hear of the other's introduction.

'You were Mr. Confident back then, weren't you?'

I've never been particularly confident—whenever I've appeared as such, it's been mostly an act. Maybe over time I just lost the ability to pretend. I shrugged. 'I wanted to impress you.'

'And you did. Where should we go for our next holiday? I'm bored of caravanning in England.'

'Let's go to Venice.' I'd already been there on a family holiday with

Becky, my ex. We wanted to ride in a gondola but her parents voted against it—far too expensive.

‘That’s because you went with *her*, isn’t it?’

I’d forgotten Becky was a no-go. But, on such days, things like that were usually nipped in the bud. ‘Of course not, it’s a beautiful city, that’s all.’

‘My parents say Rome is fantastic. Maybe we should look into it.’ She was all talk. There likely wouldn’t be another holiday.

I have never been perturbed by the fact that she could so easily mess around with a more accomplished, exciting man. Although her male colleagues were up for it—she makes sure I’m privy to that—somehow, I trust that she never would. She seems bound to me by something other than her need to control—which sounds ridiculous, given how incompatible we are in some crucial respects. I used to contemplate it myself, a sordid liaison or even a prolonged emotional affair, but I realised I didn’t want to betray her... that and I am too insecure. Besides, I wouldn’t know how to pursue someone. Not having the energy to try is a secondary problem.

One evening we were watching Graham Norton. Cora was immersed with a glass of red while I was stroking Felicity and texting. She glanced at my phone.

‘Who are you texting?’

‘Just my boss.’

‘Your boss is a woman, right?’

‘Yeah, Shirley, you know that. I mean, Bradley is kind of my boss too.’

‘You’re texting a woman, who isn’t your mum or your sister at 9pm? And don’t tell me it’s work related.’

‘No, it is. She always texts at funny times, it’s quite annoying. Normally she sends group messages, but this pertains to me in particular, so—’

‘What’s she saying?’ She adjusted herself in order to face me. ‘Why am I, on my one day off, sitting here watching you text some woman?’

I didn’t expect her to be insulted or jealous. I’m not remotely close to Shirley. She keeps to herself and is in her late sixties. Felicity looked up at me, her all-knowing bottomless beads imploring me not to fuck it up.

‘Well, ahhh. It’s to do with the monthly spreadsheets, and basically—’

She muted the TV and erupted into laughter. It seemed to reverberate in my skull. I didn't know what my face was doing.

'Did you actually think I'd be threatened by that bint you work for? You wouldn't dare look at anyone else... you know this is it.'

Felicity jumped off the sofa and sauntered to her playroom, leaving me to deal with it alone.

'Remember when we separated before we were married?' Cora continued. 'You wanted a break. I didn't put up a struggle. Less than two weeks later you came crawling back, telling me how much you regretted it.'

I was tired but angry. Sometimes the exhaustion breaks me down. Others, it fills me with an anger I can't fully suppress. I didn't want to just let it slide this time.

'What the fuck is your problem? You're being a total bitch.'

'I don't have a problem. Why are you swearing at me? I was just pointing out the obvious. Lighten up.' She gave me a pitying look, a sort of half-smirk, and unmuted the TV, turning back to Graham Norton. She was transfixed by the glamour of the actors on the couch as they relayed their charming tales of auditions and award ceremonies, thinking if she'd only taken a different path, she could have been a household name. She's told me she wants to be famous many times. It tends to go something like this:

'Yeah, me too, as a kid.'

'Not just as a kid. It's only a matter of time. I can't just spend the next fifty years living a normal life.' As if the notion is ridiculous.

'Famous for what?'

'You know how high my IQ is, right?'

'You're very clever babe, but just being clever doesn't make someone famous. You'd need some kind of niche.' Although I always respond in that way, I actually sort of believe her. The capacity to do so always presents itself, no matter what comes out of her mouth. It isn't a wholehearted belief—logic, like a shoulder angel, whispers in my ear that I've lost my senses—but something in me just does.

'*And I have a winning personality and a beautiful face, babe. What else is required?*'

I argue that if anything the Reality TV generation would take issue with a beautiful woman having brains, but she dismisses me.

Although I have a wide-ranging base level knowledge of films, TV shows and books, history and even philosophy, Cora has a complete,

in-depth understanding of these subjects; when it comes to a battle of wits, she always wins. She spends next to nothing on clothes but always manages to look stylish, even when she doesn't bother to wash her hair or iron her tops. Don't get me wrong, there are times when I would love to pour something piping hot all over her beautifully round head, flattening those bouncy curls so they look pathetic like Felicity's ears, not just because she's mean but because she's fucking obnoxious. But could I deal with the fall out?

My mother-in-law is a strong woman. That's how Cora would describe her. We like to say that: *She's a strong woman*. When in reality, the woman in question is a bitch. Same goes for 'feisty', another popular adjective. There's a mutual admiration between Cora and Donna, whereas her dad George is 'wet'. From what I know, George isn't a husband anyone envies. Donna's not into the mind games, but she's pretty messed up in her own way. For one, she doesn't bother with anniversary gifts for him (while George has to go all-out for her on any kind of occasion) and she's never extended much effort to welcome his family into hers. Yet, she expects his unconditional support and commitment, because—and this is the part I've never understood—she feels entitled. She isn't even beautiful or a go-getter like her daughter. He must have held up his end of the bargain because they're still together, with three children. No doubt Donna's mum and grandma were strong too. It trickles down the generations.

So, my wife was raised by a doting (but dangerous) mother and a well-meaning (but ineffectual) father. And her childhood, between the ages of about nine and twelve, was disrupted. She was bullied: at one point for having puppy fat, another for her slightly uneven teeth. She's never said it in so many words, but it's quite obvious that, if she had any friends in the beginning, they phased her out once the bullying got out of hand; all her school-related nostalgia from that time centres around high test scores or being teacher's pet.

I gathered that at first, during that period, she wanted to make friends but was afraid of initiating conversations only to be rejected, and later, something had convinced her that she didn't need them—only Mummy. I wouldn't be surprised if kids who'd been similarly ostracized had tried to approach her, but by that point she was so hardened that she turned them away.

She told me that once, when she was particularly upset, she confided in Donna, and she said, *Do you know why this is happening, sweet pea?*

You're a different breed, that's why. and that it brought her comfort. She said whenever she felt lonely as a child, she would remind herself of that conversation.

I once asked her if she ever went to George for advice or reassurance. She replied: 'Yeah, but no more than a few times. He always said something like *I'm sorry you're having a rough time darling, but your mother is better than me with this sort of thing.*

She witnessed many discussions around her Aunt's divorce after her Uncle's affair had been exposed. *Take him for all he's got, Donna would press. He broke your trust, now you bleed him dry. You never got much out of it anyway.* Cora gave this advice, almost verbatim, to a couple of her friends after their husbands had done the dirty on them.

Over time the criticisms ratcheted up and became more personal. Knowing I pride myself on my intelligence, she made that her new target. I know, sales rep hardly denotes 'mighty intellect', but I've always been a bit too lazy to spend the majority of my days pushing my brain to its limits. I'm a spare time polymath. From a young age I've enjoyed achieving and impressing in little ways. I read voraciously. But Cora developed a habit of researching my favourite books and finding all the possible ways to ridicule them, going in from every angle.

'You just love *The Catcher in the Rye* don't you... talk about a basic bro. Why can no-one admit that Holden is nothing but a depressed, spineless little moron? And Salinger is so repetitive. You just like whatever bookish people are supposed to like—no opinions of your own. It's embarrassing, that hipster, pseudo-intellectual shit.' She placed it back on the coffee table and went to the kitchen for her breakfast. 'And what in the fuck is this?' She gestured to the pile of crusty dishes in the sink from the night before. I had cooked, which was rare for me, but I assumed she'd do them. I went to a lot of effort.

I'm handsome enough, nice enough, clever enough, charming enough, but Cora does the lion's share of the housework. I order expensive takeaways at least once a week just to avoid washing up, I sleep in 'til two on weekends, unashamedly, and she never used to raise an eyebrow. So how or why she'd come to the conclusion that that wasn't good enough, I don't know. I'm not saying she's a nag—I'd never level that at her—but why sign up for something you're not willing to tolerate?

'So yeah, she lambasted me for saying it was my favourite book.

Ha. Jesus...'

'Why haven't you divorced her?'

'This again, eh?' Bradley, my closest friend, has a habit of getting straight to the point, and I wasn't in the mood for this one. But it was my fault for bringing up *The Catcher in the Rye*.

'Leave her. This is ridiculous.'

'You know it's not that simple.'

'Um, of course it is? She's making you suffer. She's... I'm sorry, but she's a bitch.'

'She can be. But she's stunning, intelligent, fun... it makes me feel good, being with someone like that. Someone so well-liked.'

'I don't like her.'

'That's because you know her.' We both laughed awkwardly. Bradley out of obligation. Me, because I was all out of options.

'You're a decent person. In a relationship that has well and truly run its course. And that's putting it mildly.' Bradley doesn't know everything.

I looked at him. 'But she is more intelligent. You've got a blind spot where she's concerned.' He checked his watch. 'Right, Shirley's starting the 9 a.m., you coming?'

Just getting a coffee. I'll see you in there.'

I felt compelled, at that point, to think about his words. I mean, I always contemplated the subject; it massively preoccupied me. But at this stage I was going to be critical and objective. I wanted to stop allowing my life to be dictated by my fear of her or the unknown (and it would feel like the unknown, being single again. We'd been married for six years). The good times no longer seemed to compensate for the animosity. I was realising, day-by-day, bit-by-bit, that our marriage was just as fallible if not more so than any other. I bet most couples, at least in the beginning, secretly think they're special: that they have an intense connection that no one else could possibly imagine or understand. That feeling doesn't mean what we think it means. I woke up one biting cold Autumn morning and had the realisation that I was a person I didn't want to be, married to a person I didn't want to be married to, and whatever bond we had left was too tenuous to justify any of this. But finding a way to broach the subject with her... that would take some working out. To avoid maximum damage, I had to allow her to feel like she, ultimately, had control over the fate of our marriage. And the fact that I'd realised I no longer wanted to be with her didn't mean we'd be

divorced within six months or a year or however long it usually takes. It would be a drawn out, complicated and nasty process. I planned to take however long I needed to get it right.

But the more time that passed, the more impossible it seemed.

Looking down on me, she was both radiant and powerful. As always, she dictated the rhythm, her stomach slowly rolling in and out, her chest rising and falling in conjunction.

'You like it when I take charge, don't you,' she said.

She felt so good, so strangely warm, I couldn't formulate an answer.

'Don't ignore me.'

'Fuck yes.'

She smiled. I love making her smile like that. 'You get off on it. Why?'

I couldn't answer.

'You're a follower, aren't you? Answer me.'

I didn't want to; I just wanted to go on feeling her exactly like that.

'Say it.'

'Because I'm yours.'

'Because *what*?'

'Because I'm yours, Cora.'

'That's right. And why are you mine?'

I enjoyed the degradation, but so much so that I couldn't speak. Not that she really cared.

'You've always been a follower, haven't you.'

Grey Marlow



Grey Marlow is finishing up their MA in Creative Writing at the University of Manchester having completed modules from the Gender, Sexuality and Culture course as well. They are interested in writing experimental fiction about gender, AI and mental health. They enjoy writing across forms, blurring the distinctions between them. When not writing, you can find them reading, gardening or making things—their latest project is knitting.

This is an extract from *Peach Pit*, an experimental novel which explores queer love in its myriad forms and the interaction between memory and trauma. The protagonist navigates their city with a peach pit lodged in their throat, interrupting them as they fall in and out of love. Written in the second person and moving between moments, *Peach Pit* asks the reader to place themselves in the position of the unnamed protagonist. The heaviness of the content is lightly handled with some real joy.

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Peach Pit

Flat 3, Butchers Works

Harry Belafonte's 'Shake, Shake Señora' blasts from your speaker after Lauren puts on her 'Boogie Wonderland' playlist. You dance gleefully around your bedroom, learning the words as you go. When it is finished, you play it again. You sing the lyrics back to one another, looking at each other in the reflection of the mirrored wardrobe.

Look at you! I love the shirt.

Your suit, my goodness, that leopard print!

Thanks! Check out the boots too. You pose extravagantly, leg extended to show them off. Shiny red heeled boots bought with your first month's pay.

Incredible! She stretches out her arms so the mustard balloon sleeves float in time with the music.

Shall we go get some wine?

Yep!

You go back into the kitchen to get your bags and Demaine shuffles in on worn-down slippers, her dressing gown wrapped around her gaunt frame and mass of frizzy silver hair circling her thin face. You exchange a look with Lauren who nods at you subtly. Demaine sniffs as she puts the kettle on and gets out your favourite mug to make her cup of tea. She opens the fridge aimlessly and closes it again.

There's leftover vegan meatballs on the hob if you want any?

Thanks. She sniffs, generously scooping pasta into a bowl before sitting down on the worn black leather sofa across from you.

Are you doing anything tonight? you ask.

Not really, was just going to watch anime in bed.

Do you wanna come dancing?

I'm not dressed!

We can wait!

No, no, it's alright, I won't keep you.
It's fine, we're gonna get some wine first! Lauren chimes in.
Oh—okay then, I won't take long.

You and Lauren step out into the street and you look at her, suddenly nervous.

Remember that guy I told you about, the one that works at Tesco?
Yeah, I remember! Did you work out if he was the one you matched with on Tinder?

Yeah, it's not him. I know his name now.

You do? She steps back in surprise.

Well, I came in this morning to get some bits and he gave me his Instagram.

Bold!

I know! He hugged me too.

He's into you!

You think?

For sure.

Well...he's actually working right now.

Let's go then! You're gonna blow him away, you look mega.

Oh, stop it, you. You laugh and throw out your hand.

You breathe in and step into the little Tesco; the awful fluorescent lights make you blink after the

darkness of the mild, October night. You see him on his knees, on the hard floor, restocking the fridge.

Is that him? Lauren says a bit too loudly.

You widen your eyes in warning, but it was loud enough to get his attention and he stops. He moves back onto his heels to look up at you, literally through rose-tinted glasses. A little smirk forms on his round face and he brushes his hand against the nape of his neck, against his soft buzz cut.

Great suit. His face makes clear his appreciation.

Thanks! you chirp, your voice coming out high, the pit catching in your throat so you cough to clear it. Lauren wanders off to browse the alcohol, giggling.

Are you two off somewhere special?

Kinda, we're going to Kelham.

Ooof, nice. His gaze takes in all of you and you feel a warm prickling in your body so you make for an escape.

Gotta grab some wine! You join Lauren who is trying to contain

herself, hardly keeping up her pretence of browsing.

Shush! You're being so obvious. You give her a gentle nudge.

I'm a Worksop girl, we don't do subtle! She speaks loudly with a flourish of her arm.

Clearly! you try to say haughtily. Despite yourself, you smile at her particularly pronounced accent when she says 'Worksop'.

You check the labels of the wine and Avery comes over. Do you need any help?

Oh, we're just trying to see the vegan ones for Lauren.

This one's good. Handing you a bottle with a bike embossed into the neck, his hand grazes yours and your cheeks warm.

Thanks, that's great. You force the pit down again.

He walks you over to the till, putting the wine through. I put my discount on there, don't tell my manager, he winks.

Our secret, you reply, letting yourself sound flirty.

That really is a great suit. He says confidently as you turn away.

You shrug a shoulder nonchalantly as Lauren takes you by the arm, guiding you out the shop.

As soon as you are on the street she exclaims. Oh bitch, he wants you bad!

He kinda does, doesn't he?

The Morning After

Shit! Lauren bolts upright at the sound of her alarm. I can't be late, Debbie'll kill me. Her ombréd hair is matted, dried sick coating the bottom. Wearing just her top, she jumps out of bed, quickly gathering her things. She sniffs her armpits, declaring that there's no time for a shower. You slowly open your eyes, squinting at the bright light coming in from under the three blinds. She heads into the bathroom to freshen up, you sit up in bed, head spinning, put your slippers on and walk down the hallway. While the tea brews you pop a slice of bread into the toaster. You brew an Oolong, and two Yorkshire teas for you and Lauren, plenty of sugar in yours, cashew milk for both. Knocking on Demaine's door gently, you call out that you've made her a tea.

I'll be out soon, she replies coolly. Slightly affronted, you set the tea down on the counter, going back for yours and Lauren's. She has emerged from the bathroom smelling a little better, having brushed the sick from her loose waves and gotten dressed.

Will this do? You look great, you say sincerely, holding out the dry toast.

Fuck off! She takes a bite.

You chuckle, passing her a mug.

She sips contentedly but pauses. Wait, is this oat milk?

Cashew.

Oh okay, good. Her vegan Spidey-senses subside.

Your phone vibrates against the side table. In a rush, you remember Lauren grappling for your phone to call Avery and the peach pit drops all the way into your stomach.

Hey you, I'm free for a coffee before shift if you want? ☺

Oh my god, Lauren, what do I say?

Say yes, you idiot! She wrinkles her nose. But don't go smelling like that.

Fine one to talk!

Yes that would be great ☺

What cafe do you fancy? ☺ and when?

I don't mind, I haven't been to
that many in town n I can be ready
fairly soon

That sounds chill, right?

Of course, don't be a melon. She guzzles at her tea, setting it on the bedside table.

I got to Waterstones cafe alot? Shall we say
12:45 (so specific haha)

Yeah that would be nice! Very
specific, I'll be there

Ace, see you soon ☺

I've gotta go to work now, good luck on your date! Lauren pulls you into a big hug. Pop by after and fill me in?

Of course. I hope you make it through the day! She gestures dramatically and sets off for Moonko, slice of toast in hand.

12:45 is really specific, you think, checking your phone. 12:39. Are you gonna be late? Living in town is good for someone who is always running late but Waterstones is up the other end so the soles of your Doc Marten sandals slap against the pavement. Thank fuck you wore socks with them because these ones give you blisters at the best of times. You check your appearance in the front camera, your hair wavy and tousled from the night before, signature big earrings in contrasting patterns, one a stippled deep red like a gemstone, the other black and white stripes. You look good. You take a quick selfie, put your phone back into the pocket of your trousers and speed up.

You walk in-between redbrick buildings and run-down warehouses, half sit empty while others have been converted into studios, noisy as people go about their work. On your right is the Tesco where you and Avery met, if you stand on the steps just opposite while on tiptoes, you can peek over the top of the window film to see whether he is at the checkout. A trick you'd picked up to stop you from having to buy food all the time, just to be able to talk to him. You smile as you walk up the steps to cross the road. You cut through the slope outside Millennium Gallery, moving through the crowds of people congregating in the square between the Winter Gardens and the Crucible on their lazy Sunday mooches. It's now a straight line to Waterstones but you speed up. 12:42. When you reach the entrance to Public, an ex-underground toilet-cum-bar and then the police box which makes you think of Doctor Who, you know you're almost there.

You speed walk through Orchard Square, busy with pushchairs and idling shoppers. Don't they know you've got a date to get to? You catch your breath just outside Waterstones, deciding which entrance to take to the cafe. Up the metal black stairs you will be in the cafe immediately or, up through the bookshop's stairs gives you an extra few moments to gather yourself. You decide on the latter.

This is the perfect place for a date, you think, surrounded by books. At the top of the stairs you take a deep breath inhaling the smell of coffee and new books. You scan the tables and there he is, in the back left corner by the doors, two armchairs facing each other. If you'd come up through the black stairs you would have practically stood on top of him. Relieved you made the right choice, you square your shoulders and walk towards him, he stands up as soon as he sees you, his smile pushes his glasses up higher on his face. He dissipates any awkwardness by opening his arms immediately for a hug. You step

into them, once again enjoying how your similar heights make it comfortable. You breathe in deeply; he smells faintly clean. When you move away you feel the loss of his warmth.

Hey stranger, he laughs. Sitting back down.

Gosh, I am a bit, aren't I? I did think on my way over, what am I doing?

Just going on a date with the guy from Tesco, that's all.

Your eyes widen. Oh, so it is a date then?

I thought so, as long as you want it to be?

I do.

Good. He smiles brightly, his cheeks pushing up his pink lensed glasses. Can I get you a drink?

You bicker with him over who's paying but he stands firmly between you and the card machine, holding out his almost full loyalty card. You're helping me out really, he says, it'll be free next time.

You order a hot chocolate; he gets a black coffee.

Back at your table, he holds the mug to his face, his knee bouncing, the only outward sign that he is nervous.

So.

So. He smiles back at you.

You're a collage artist, right? I wanted to ask you what your work is like.

Yeah I am! Here, I can show you. He puts his cup down, moving his chair closer to yours and pulls out an Android, opening up Instagram, scrolling through his feed until he finds his artwork. Stuff like this mostly.

Mushrooms!

Lots of 'em. I get these old books of botanical drawings from eBay and take a scalpel to cut carefully round the pictures to make these scenes with them, like this one. He gestures at another post.

You listen intently as he talks about his work, watching his face light up. Oof. You get the tingly, charged feeling in your skin. You move in closer.

What about you? He says, tucking his phone away into the pocket of his tight trousers.

Me? I graduated in Philosophy, now I'm just working for the uni for a year. I'm thinking about doing an MA.

Oh cool, which course? I'm attempting to do a masters alongside my final year, I'm not sure whether I'm gonna be able to finish it or not.

What? I didn't even know that was a thing?

It is. He shrugs his shoulders in a gesture of humility.

I had no idea I was in the presence of a genius! He chuckles in reply. The course is Gender, Sexuality and Culture.

He shifts in his seat slightly, the first time he hasn't seemed at ease since you started talking. Oh yeah? What interests you in that?

Hmm. You pause, deciding something. Well, erm, I started thinking about my gender when studying philosophy so I wanna learn more I guess? You clear your throat, the peach pit expanding suddenly, silencing you for a moment. The pit scratches the back of your throat, angry and hot so you pick up your cup, sipping hot chocolate until you can talk again. Sorry, I'm a bit nervous about saying that, I haven't talked about this on a first date before.

He nods at you, a look of understanding. Does it help to know that I'm trans?

Putting your cup down, you are surprised. You are? What're your pronouns?

He/him. I'm a trans man.

Oh, cool!

So it's okay then?

What do you mean?

That I'm trans?

Of course. You were expecting it not to be?

I'm just not used to it being no big deal.

Me neither, but it should be. He nods in agreement.

Oh, and I'm bi too.

Same! you giggle raising a cup.

You both fall quiet for a moment, taking in the exchange.

I do have to ask though, you say inquisitively. He goes to cut you off, presuming you might ask about genitals, so you carry on quickly—what's with the glasses?

At this he bursts into laughter. It's a brilliant laugh, a high-pitched chortle when he really gets going. You can't help but join in.

Later, beside you in your room
he will ask: So you've never
dated a trans person before?

No, you will reply, but I've been
dating myself all these years.

S.W. Building, 5 minutes from your flat

Rachel: Would you like a tea or anything?

You: Yes please, do you have any berry teas?

Rachel: Let me have a look, we have all sorts back here, I'll put it in the Beyoncé mug.

You: The best one.

Rachel: Go and get yourself comfortable upstairs why don't you?

You walk up the staircase, preferring it to the lift. When you get to the top floor you look up at the skylight, blue skies overhead and then back down to the brightly lit atrium filled with plants. You breathe in deeply, feeling grounded in this place. You run your hand along the brick walls, which remind you of home. Rachel is always telling you to reach out and touch them when you need to. You sit in the leather armchair, put the blanket over your lap and hug the cushion to your chest.

Rachel enters the room. She is as gorgeous as ever, wide smile, impeccably made up, glossy, straightened red hair. She smooths her leather bodycon skirt as she sits down. Placing the mug on the table between you.

Rachel: Here you go. Would you like me to light any candles, anything in the room you want changing?

You: Candles would be good, everything else is okay. Could I have the stone, though?

Rachel places the labradorite worry stone down on the table so you can move it around in your hand, feeling its coolness, the curves resting inside the arches of your palms.

Rachel: What would you like to talk about today?

You: I'm not so sure.

Rachel: Would you like to start by telling me about your week?

You: Okay. Work's been alright, I feel both bored and exhausted all the time and I worry about money. Even being here I'm thinking of the hours I'm losing and then I have to remind myself that this is important.

Rachel: Those worries don't stop you from coming, why is that?

You: Because I know that I need to do this for myself, I—

Rachel is quiet for a moment, letting you find the words. She smiles, encouragingly.

You: I think I need to do this and maybe I deserve to have this time.

Rachel: You're right, you do deserve this time. Do you find that

difficult to say?

You cross your arms out in front of your body, breaking eye contact.

You: Yeah, I, uh, I don't often worry about me but I think I probably should.

Rachel: You've talked to me before about putting other people first, before yourself, would you say these things are related?

You: Yes. It's like, for everyone else I can give all this love, I can find exactly the right way to care for them and sometimes it doesn't feel like I get that back in return, not just from them but from myself too.

Rachel: Do you think you are hard to love?

There it is. The gut puncher. No matter how many times she asks you that, it hasn't got any easier hearing it. You make yourself small. The peach pit, however, takes up more room, sitting forcibly in your oesophagus. You reach for a sip of tea which hasn't yet cooled, hoping to warm up your throat, instead it starts to tickle and the pit threatens to make itself known.

Rachel: You're not hard to love.

She says it so kindly, with so much warmth in her eyes, smiling into you that you almost feel like it might be true.

You

are

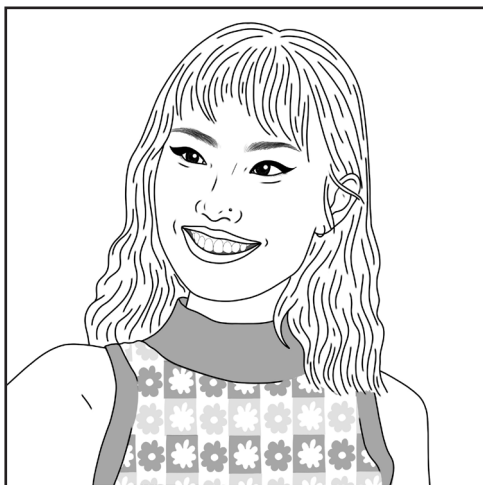
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love

Weng-U Pun



Weng-U is a writer from Macau who has enjoyed four years in Manchester studying English Literature and Creative Writing. As a Chinese woman and a feminist, she tries to populate her surreal worlds with more women, diverse ethnicities, and gender identities to better represent the planet that we live in. She's concerned with the impact of technology on our lives, likes predicting and questioning human behaviour and loves capturing our idiosyncrasies. She thinks humans are incredibly intelligent and wholesome yet ridiculously dumb and infuriating at times.

'2098' is set in Manchester when climate breakdown has changed the way we live forever—humans are forced to become nocturnal, technology has wound itself tightly around the very definition of human existence and climate refugees flock to European countries for survival. Oh, and time-travelling tourists from the future exist too—but don't worry, it's the new normal.

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📷 @wentzzzzz

2098

Chapter 1

Jade had stayed up all day again.

She watched the small sliver of sky from her shuttered window go from pigeon-grey to tar-like indigo.

She felt more familiar with the moon than she ever did with the sun. She saw the bleached, blinding sun as a cruel stranger. It sucked all the life out of any living thing beneath its touch. She knew deep down the sun was just an innocent, dying star, the giver of life, yet she could not bring herself to love it. She grew up with the moon as the light in her sky. The lonely pearl in the bleached coral reef that she called home.

Jade had decided to write a letter. She was sitting below the window at the desk that she and her brother shared. Kei was sleeping so soundly that it sounded like he was purring away. She fiddled with the pen that she had found in one of Ma's old trousers. The idea of using the hard, plastic thing to write with was as alien to her as using a single chopstick to eat. She tried first with her left hand, then her right. She gripped the pen awkwardly, too tightly, and the words came slowly. The ink was a streaky blue and the tip of the pen dragged reluctantly across the back of an old flyer for air purifiers.

When Jade was finished, she folded the piece of paper up, slid it into a makeshift envelope that she made from more flyers and sealed the lip of it with some leftover rice.

'Little Jade?'

The door emitted a soft whoosh.

Jade jerked awake. She had fallen asleep at the desk. Kei was gone, his bed unmade.

'Come and have some lunch. I made some noodles with soy sauce.'

You can have tea eggs too if you'd like.'

Jade pushed herself up with her elbows. 'Okay, Ma.'

She heard the door close again, though Ma never shut the door properly. She listened to the quiet shuffling of Ma's slippers as she went back into the living room. The TV was switched on soon after. The same po-faced news anchor was relating the news of the day. America was still on fire and their dictator was still trying to cover it up. Almost half the population was convinced that it was a hoax. The other half was planning an armed revolution. More places going underwater. Ireland was getting smaller as they spoke. China still denied that they knew anything about the bio-terrorist that was caught last week. Hottest day on record in the UK when they slept – a whopping 43 degrees Celsius.

She strained her head to look out the window. The sky was black like burnt toast.

'Jade?'

She reluctantly pushed herself out of the chair.

Kei stared motionlessly at the ceiling, slack on the brown sofa like a dirty sock. Popo and Gonggong, Ma's parents, were watching the TV next to Kei. Popo and Gonggong both had rollers in their hair. Gonggong was slowly painting his nails a reflective red. Ma and Ba chewed and slurped noisily at their food. They sat around a peeling imitation-wood table worn from years of use. Ugly grey plastic surfaced in large spots on the table. Through the window, Jade could see people in the other building doing the same thing as they were, fifty floors above the ground. Their faces were animated in lurid light. Although the Chans were familiar with their neighbours' daily routines, and Jade believed that they were aware of theirs too, they did not know each other's names, nor had they ever crossed paths. They were not acquaintances, merely familiar strangers. All she knew about her neighbours was that they were climate immigrants like them. Everyone living in these buildings was.

'Morning Popo. Morning Gonggong,' Jade mumbled drowsily. 'Morning everyone.'

'You're finally up.' Ba turned over to glance at her. He was in a loose white tank-top and in blue shorts with palm trees that his Ba owned. Ma looked over and smiled at Jade. She was dressed to go out. She was in a sleeveless purple top with small white flowers dotted all over it.

'Oh? You've got work today?'

'Last minute tutoring session,' Ma said matter-of-factly.

'You look nice, Ma.'

'Thanks, Jade.'

Jade's parents worked as tutors for wealthy families that could afford it and for those who still found value in higher education. Popo, Ma's mother, had a university degree in Physics. She tutored Ma herself and Ma ended up with a scholarship which got her into school with the privileged kids. Ba had a similar experience in life. He did exceptionally well in school, but neither of them ended up going to university. He tutored, and he was a part-time technician. Sometimes he would get called into companies to fix their machines. However, the difficult reality was that there were simply not many jobs going around anymore, not even when Jade's parents were her age. AI ran the city. People resorted to trading their personal possessions, food, bodies, drugs or knowledge. True wealth was incestuous. Nepotism became synonymous with common sense.

'What's Kei doing?'

Kei was now sitting upright with one arm extended. His eyes were focused solemnly on the vintage plants on the windowsill. He wiggled his fingers slowly before grabbing something in the air. He missed. He grabbed again with both hands. The dusty plant shuddered and teetered on the edge of the window.

'Hey!' Ba shouted.

'What is he doing?' Jade repeated loudly.

Gonggong snorted.

Kei turned over to look at them, blinking slowly. The implant on the back of his neck glowed a deep blue. It was the size of a pea.

'Ma, what is he doing?' Irritation began to take root in her.

Ma's eyes attempted to meet Ba's furtively.

'I got him VR contacts as a surprise,' Ba said finally. 'He's been doing well in school, and, well, it's something for him to do.'

Gonggong coughed, raising his hand to look at his painted nails.

'So you got him time-burners.' Jade watched as Kei took the contacts off. He struggled briefly.

Gonggong and Popo sighed collectively and looked pointedly at Ma.

'Oh, please—'

'That's enough, Jade. Sit down. You two, take your vitamins,' said Ba. He placed two translucent tablets on their plates. They were a delicate yellow, as if sunshine was trapped in the tablets themselves.

Ma was silent as she moved to the kitchen. Jade watched as she rinsed the dishes.

‘Hei, you don’t need to wash up, you know,’ said Ba.

Ma ignored him. He sighed and began peeling a tea egg. ‘I don’t know why she bothers when I’ve just fixed the cupboard,’ he muttered.

‘Our Hei’s just not lazy.’ Gonggong replied.

‘What are time-burners?’ Kei said, sitting down at the table. His implant had stopped glowing.

Jade couldn’t help herself. ‘Those stupid VR contacts.’

Ba glared at her. ‘Eat. Both of you. Now be quiet. When I was your age, I had respect for my parents. It was very tough back then—’

‘—Ba. When you were my age, you could still go out in the sun—’

‘Shut up.’

Kei’s eyes travelled anxiously from Jade’s to Ba’s. He opened his mouth meekly, then closed it again.

In the unsavoury silence, the Chan family stubbornly directed their attention to the TV:

—yet another drunken scuffle between the locals and the tourists in Piccadilly Gardens. PC Uma Kane said—

Ba tutted and the channel switched.

‘These people are ridiculous. Don’t ever get yourself involved in this, okay, Jade? Stay away from these people.’

‘How am I going to stay away from the pofs if they look like us?’

Gonggong muttered inaudibly. Popo picked up a book and started reading it. Jade saw that it was a book on the history of space travel.

Ba ignored them.

A message from the UN: remember to take each day as it comes. Reach out to loved ones if you are feeling low.

Jade rolled her eyes. She decided to ignore the TV and focus instead on the noodles before her. They were all empty words. Ma was still in the kitchen.

‘I’m going to meet up with Honey and the others later,’ Jade announced, wiping her mouth with a scrap piece of cloth that was on the table.

‘Honey?’ Ba looked her sternly in the face.

Jade tried to exhale gently through her nose. ‘Yes, Ba.’

‘They’re bad news,’ said Ba with a shake of his head. ‘They have no regard for their future.’

Jade held her tongue.

‘I don’t like you hanging around with kids like Honey, Jade,’ said

Ma in a low but firm voice. She had appeared suddenly in the doorway of the kitchen with crossed arms. 'You know this.'

'You need to look after yourself, little Jade,' Popo said softly.

'Honey's not a bad person.' Jade said quietly, though her exasperation gave her words a sharp edge. 'I'll come back and cook with you, Popo.'

Kei fiddled with his VR contacts case. They were yellow, his favourite colour. Ba sighed loudly. Ma turned away and started washing the dishes again in silence.

Jade sectioned her naturally black hair into four tied sections and looped pink ribbons over each of them. They fell just past her shoulders and swung weightlessly on the back of her head as she moved. She applied purple eyeshadow around her eyes and drew three long thin isosceles triangles on the centre of her eyelids and below her lower lash line. A delicate smattering of pink glitter was dabbed over her nose to mimic freckles. She had always been jealous of Ma's freckles. Ma had an abundance of freckles from being out in the sun in her youth. Unfortunately, neither moonbathing nor standing beneath the harsh light from street lamps had the same effect.

She put on a blue silky summer dress with faint butterflies patterned over the fabric. It used to be Ma's. Ma said that she used to wear this dress in Macau before they became nocturnal. She said butterflies were scarce but not rare then. That was just around the time that Jade was born. She pulled on some worn black leather boots that she had found at the Scrap. She had found them with white cartoon-y daisies painted on and she often wondered about their past life.

Jade didn't remember much of Macau. She relied on her parents' memories. When she was a child, she watched her Ma's memories in Macau with near-religious fervour. As she grew older, however, disillusionment and futile envy cemented themselves in her mind and she stopped revisiting the memories of a place that was denied from her by the negligence of generations past.

Jade left an hour after Ma left for work. Popo had gone downstairs to the market. Gonggong and Ba were having their midnight nap and Kei was playing video games with his friends online. They all had their own predictable routines.

She headed towards the city park which was fifteen minutes away from where she lived. It was built where a square used to be twenty years ago to accommodate the increasing population. Two shopping centres used to overlook the square, and from photos that Jade had

seen before, they used to be packed with sun-lovers and reckless shoppers when the days were warm and the sky could be a luminous pale blue. Before that, it used to be a corn exchange. Now, only small shops selling essentials and a trampled park lit by flickering lights were left in its place.

The streets were never empty here in Manchester. Imposing street lamps blanched the city they towered over. The government claimed that this was light therapy, a solution for the people's lack of natural light exposure. In most of Manchester, darkness was never able to fully permeate down to the ground despite the evergrey forest made of concrete that had taken root in its place. It was horribly clinical.

A graffitied bus came rolling up right before Jade was about to cross. The once-sleek black bus was adorned with mysterious scars and sprayed with fluorescents that changed colours as the bus swept past. There was no one inside. She saw a vague reflection of herself in an ad on the side of the bus. She was momentarily suspended in all-silver attire and her hair was white like tissue paper. After the bus and white-haired Jade were gone, the road was clear and would be until the next bus came by in half an hour.

As Jade crossed the uneven road with exposed brick, she tried to picture a time when the sounds of horses' hooves were a crucial part of the city's fabric. Although she knew what horses looked like through photos on the internet, she could not imagine one standing beside her. They seemed huge compared to humans.

She thought of a time when factories changed the colours of the sky from a gentle grey to a murky dark and blackened the teeth and lungs of Manchester's inhabitants. She wondered what the Mancunians of the past would think of her. She wondered what they would think of this.

In the distance, a group of people were shouting and swaying on the streets. They were men clumped together in desperate ecstasy, muttering and grasping at people or things that only they could see. As they got nearer, Jade noticed that they had taken their tops off and bunched them into balls in their restless fists. Their voices were a fascinating fusion of accents but sometimes a word pronounced with a distinctive Manchester accent would hang in the air before dissolving in the little ruckus. Jade avoided them.

A woman in an excessively wide cream hat walked behind them in conversation with a hologram of a nodding man's head beside her. An elderly Southeast-Asian couple with hunched backs passed by her with

trolleys piled high with clothes. They each had a bionic arm that made the otherwise strenuous task effortless. As Jade passed, they nodded at her. Recognising them, Jade nodded and smiled back.

As she made her way nearer the heart of the city, she saw more and more signs for mod shops flashing and buzzing in ill-fitted fluorescent lights. They were haloed by an assortment of fluorescent holograms demonstrating what services they provided. Dubious animations of needles, drills and hammer-like objects near pixelated skin hovered in the air. A queue had begun to form at one of them. A beautiful pregnant woman with curly pink hair and pink feathery lashes caught Jade's eye. The woman was giggling and pointing at nothing in particular. 'You've got such hairy wings!' she exclaimed. In a dimmer alleyway, Jade saw several young women with shaved heads huddled together. Each had a band of blinking metal wrapped around their foreheads and looped around their ears. They did not notice her as she passed.

Jade thought those who were obsessed with welcoming technology into their bodies always had an eerie aura around them. Most of the people outside the shop leaned against the wall and seemed to stare right through her. They always seemed to be living elsewhere rather than in the now.

Jade turned off into a quieter street towards the square where the park was and became more alert. Although she was familiar with the area, she could not forget the horrific hate crimes that frequently occurred when she was a child. There used to be scuffles almost every night in the city. There were clashes between the racists, the bitterly unemployed, the drunks, the virtual addicts, the homeless and the disillusioned youth. But in recent years, some of them formed an unlikely and unspoken solidarity against the pofs—the people of the future. Besides, there was surveillance almost everywhere now in the city.

'Hello! How are you doing?'

Jade jumped, though she did not scream. A hologram had materialised in front of her. She had been so preoccupied with her thoughts that she had forgotten about the sneaky ads that peppered the streets. It was a Chinese woman her age standing in front of tall, dark blinds. 'Are you sick of being kept awake by *blinding* sunlight?'

'No,' she said, walking through it.

'Have a good day!' it chirped before being abducted abruptly by the street lamp that it was cast from.

The grass in the park was crunchy and shaggy. It looked more like hay than grass, but nonetheless, it was alive. It lazily encroached on the

once clear paths that denoted its territory. The benches were engulfed by the corpses of tall weeds. Jade trudged through the grass with the hem of her dress lifted, careful not to let it snag on anything.

The park was usually quite empty, though she could already hear the clatter of wheels from skaters in the near distance. She tried to savour her proximity to true silence and took her time to walk around the park. Although her habitual restlessness began to insinuate itself in her thoughts, she pressed on and tried her hardest to think of nothing at all. She wanted to experience this moment as it was—a rare moment of solitude.

She thought of Kei's VR contacts.

Poignance rippled through her. She wished she hadn't been so curt with her family. They didn't understand, after all, why Jade had become so averse to technology. Time-burners. None of them lived in the present anymore. It depressed her and everyone around her. But what could they do? What was there to enjoy in the present?

Jade forced herself to focus on the crunch of grass beneath her shoes and pushed further into the park.

Through the years, the layers and layers of graffiti bestowed by the artistic and the angry people of the city had reduced most of the artwork to mere colourful squiggles. The ramp was christened yet again with neon pink and orange words:

NOT UR TIME ZOO

WE ARE NOT PEOPLE OF THE PAST

Anna Burke



Anna Burke grew up in a small village, but spent most of her time absorbed in various fantasy universes. After graduating with a first in English Literature from Cambridge University, she came to Manchester's Creative Writing MA to learn how to apply some narrative structure to her imagination. Though Anna is devoted to fantasy and the wonder of creating and experiencing unique settings, she's also starting to explore non-fiction as a way of relating queer experiences.

Anna's novel-in-progress, *The Singing Worlds*, is a fantasy story set on a group of worlds that are dying only decades after their creation. The story explores themes of redemption, faith, the hurt caused by living for others' expectations, and the healing found beyond. In this extract, set at the opening of the novel's Part II, readers meet with a young man living in an unusual community—and carrying a staggering responsibility.

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The Singing Worlds

An hour before first light, Zeth rises, dresses without a lantern, packs his bag, and brews a flask of tea. Then he buckles on his shield and sword and walks out into the snow to prevent the end of his world.

Outside his hut, the island is almost silent. There are no voices from the clusters of huts built against the mountainside and no movement from the paths that twine between them. The chimes and wind harps strung between the buildings emit only a few intermittent notes. Aside from the faint snowfall, only the beacon fires break the stillness. They shudder against the flank of the mountain, marking the trails up to the pastures and the farm terraces in a row of amber dots, bright against the black sky and white snow.

Zeth stands before his doorway, breath thickening into clouds. It's eerie that Menet Var can be so quiet at a time when it's hours from maybe-death. But then, if there were storms and panic every time Zeth had to prevent the annihilation of the island and everyone on it—well, there'd be storms and panic twice a month, and that would be exhausting for everybody.

All the same, the stillness is unnerving. So Zeth closes his eyes, exhales, and spreads his awareness out from his body. He beckons his senses to reach beyond the obvious information of *it's cold and the chimes are quiet and the air tastes of frost and smells of woodsmoke*. His perception widens, deepens—until he can feel it. The soft hum of the Song, the murmur of the fabric of reality.

He listens. And his senses awaken, bringing him a rush of comforting movement: the motion of every lazy snowflake. The shiver of the beacon fires. And far above him and out of sight, the tramp of boots on earth and the push of bodies against the air, heading up the trail marked by the fires.

That will be the shepherds, heading early to the pastures. Empty

as the morning seems, Menet Var is waking up, like always.

And Zeth would really quite like it to keep doing that, so he turns his back on the village and follows the firelit trail down the mountain toward the moor. There's light on the horizon by the time he reaches the hills, revealing the sky and the slow-moving bulks of islands drifting through it. The snow begins to still, and the clouds that shed it sink down into a fog before falling below the island's rim. From afar, Menet Var must look like it's floating on a sea of cloud rather than drifting free in the sky.

Sunrise is close. And Shara told him that they needed to be in position soon after dawn, so Zeth quickens his pace. It'd be nice to arrive early and have time for breakfast before he and Shara prevent the Shattering. Zeth has saved the island on an empty stomach before, and he managed, and he could manage again. But it's hardly a comfortable experience.

He hurdles an iced-over stream and turns from the heart of the moor, toward the edge of the island. It's a barren place, the grass blown into rounded clumps, the rocks wind-scrubbed of all but the toughest mosses.

Shara's sitting on the cliffside, her legs dangling over the edge and her crimson scarf lifted by the wind. Zeth tries to ignore his instinctive stab of terror at her choice of seating, and very much ignores his desire to run over and pull her back. She'd probably punch him.

She raises an arm as Zeth approaches. Zeth finds a rock close to Shara but a good few strides away from the edge, and sits down. 'I brought tea,' he says.

'Thank Eshra,' Shara says, and holds out her hand. 'I need something warm. Just for once, I'd like the planet to try to kill us at noon, so we can do this without losing the feeling in our fingers.'

Zeth smiles. 'I wouldn't hope too hard.'

'Never do.'

She takes the flask from him with her right hand. The left, Zeth notices, twitches a little but otherwise doesn't move. He frowns and leans closer. 'How's your arm?'

Shara grunts. 'Sluggish. But don't worry about fixing it. Save your energy for the Shattering.'

'I can do both. I need to do both.' Because there's always a chance for demons, or worse, raiders. And if Zeth's attacked while he's stopping the Shattering, he'll need Shara to defend him.

She grunts again, but pushes herself back from the cliff and

marches over to sit down next to his rock. 'Fine. Just don't wear yourself out.'

She pulls back her sleeve and reveals the prosthetic arm: wood engraved with swirling patterns. It's her own design, because only a mind like Shara's could have figured out where to put the joints and how to slot the pieces together. She has an instinct for how things fit together, for patterns and calculations and cause-and-effect. But it takes Zeth to make the arm move. He's a Wind-Singer; manipulating movement is his domain.

He lifts her wrist in both hands and focuses. He reaches out to the constant stir of energy that's in the motion of the wind and the bowing of the grass, gathers it up, and channels it into Shara's fingers, her wrist, up the carved muscle. He pulls it into her arm until the wood brims with stored-up kinetic energy, and knits that energy to the rest of Shara's body.

This won't make the arm respond to her thoughts. That would probably require some kind of telepathy, which isn't something Zeth can do. But he *can* make the energy thrum in wait and respond to her movements. When she moves the flesh-and-blood part of her arm, the part above the elbow, the stored-up magic will sense it and respond, moving the next few joints. And then the energy will respond to *that* movement and set the next part of the arm in motion, and so on, right down to the fingertips.

It's not perfect. It doesn't always move exactly as Shara intends, and it never moves with the same fluidity as her right arm. And while Zeth can get it to work for a day or two, it always becomes slow and stubborn and finally still. Even Zeth can't create perpetual motion—can't *create* motion at all, in fact, only sense it or slow it or speed it. Which is stupid, because if he can stop a falling object or allow a person to run at twice their normal speed, he should be able to do something as important as giving his best friend an arm that works.

He'll make it work. Someday. For now, the wood heats beneath his touch, and the fingers vibrate softly and curl into a fist.

Shara nods. 'Thanks.'

'No problem.' Zeth reaches for his pack and pulls it open. 'Breakfast?'

'Eshra, yes.'

They sit and eat in silence, watching the clouds shift around them as Menet Var floats steadily forward. Other islands pass by, some gliding across the horizon, others dark and distant shapes between the clouds

below. Nothing passes over them except for a few small rocks. That's normal. This world is a cloud of islands, drifting above and around and over each other, layer upon layer, right down to whatever lies at the core. Of all those islands, Menet Var is one of the highest. It's rare that another island passes above them.

'So,' Zeth says, after a few minutes have passed. 'This is definitely happening?'

For answer, Shara unbuckles the skychart from her belt and unfurls it onto the grass. It's a thick roll of leather marked with thousands of dots. Some are dust-speck small, some large as a fingernail. Each one represents an island, and between them is a tangle of lines and arrows, marking out the islands' trajectories through the sky.

So Shara says, anyway. To Zeth, the chart's a jumble—or an artwork, maybe, since it looks pretty without giving him any solid information. But Zeth isn't the one with the navigator's mind that translates the squiggles and dots into patterns. These markings tell Shara where Menet Var has been and where it's going and what islands it will pass, as it follows the same route around and through the world that it always does.

And sometimes, the map allows Shara to figure out when an island has broken from its usual pattern and is lurching toward Menet Var on a collision course. A Shattering. The kind of thing that a civilisation has to learn to survive, when their god abandons them and leaves their world half-created and slowly crumbling.

At least, that's the theory. Certainly, everyone who's old enough to remember says that there were no Shatterings before Eshra left.

'It's happening,' Shara says, and points to one of the dots. 'This island here should have passed us half an hour ago. Never showed up. Which means it ran into something and got turned to rubble.' She jabs at the chart again. 'It would have gone right into the path of the one that's coming at us. See?'

Zeth doesn't see, but if Shara sees it, it's real enough for him. 'Yeah.'

'Sure you do.' Shara lifts her head from the chart, her lips twitching into the closest thing to a grin that she ever gives anyone. 'Hey—if you feel dumb listening to me explaining all this, remember that very soon I'll get to sit and feel useless while I watch you stop a giant flying mountain from ramming into us.'

Zeth tries to smile, but he doesn't think it's very convincing. He's stood alone against the fury of this broken planet dozens of times, and

he's never messed it up before. But it's just him between this thing and everyone he loves and everyone always has such total faith that he'll save them—

'You're panicking,' Shara says.

Zeth manages a smile. 'I'm okay.'

Shara opens her mouth to respond, then stops. A stillness settles over her. Then she rises, sweeping the skychart into a bundle under her arm and releasing a slow breath—the same hiss-like sound she makes when staring down an arrow at a demon. 'There you are,' she growls.

Her eyes are on the blue before them—blue that, in the distance, has given way to one small dark smudge.

The food in Zeth's mouth loses its last dregs of flavour. It's early. They were meant to have more time. *He* was meant to have more time.

He tosses his uneaten chunk of bread aside. 'How long before it hits us?'

'It's not hitting us,' Shara says. 'But if you weren't here? I'd say sixteen minutes.'

'Oh.'

Shara looks at him, head tilted, and Zeth bites the inside of his mouth. 'That's. Uh. A little faster than I thought it would be.'

'You've stopped faster.'

'I know. I know.'

Shara puts a hand on his arm for a moment, then steps back. Her role in this is over. As Skymaster, her part in this was to realise the island was coming, get Zeth here at the right time, point him toward the right hunk of rock, and stand by to defend him from any ill-timed attacks. From here, everything is Zeth's to do.

'Eshra,' Shara says, and turns her face toward the sky. 'God of life's eternal movement, you created us, and you abandoned us. We live on your half-made world as it crumbles around us, but we survive. Give Zeth the strength to protect us. Though you have forsaken us, let us keep the lives you gave.' She's silent for a moment. Then she kicks a pebble over the cliff. 'Or don't. Your choice.'

Zeth stands up and steps a little closer to the cliff edge, breathes the snow-cold air deep into his lungs. He closes his eyes and listens.

He spreads his senses out into the Song. He drinks in the awareness it brings to him: the stirring of the air in his own throat, then the air in Shara's, then the air parted a mile away by the running of an animal across the moor. He feels the bending of every grass blade around him. The steady drift of an island passing far below Menet Var, the rapid

scudding of a smaller cluster of rocks above them.

He presses his awareness out farther. He feels the stirring of doors and windows and bodies in the village far behind him as his people wake. The billowing of heated air in the forge, the fall of a hammer and the shudder of metal beneath it. The pacing of a herd of kern in the upper pasture, hooves scraping as they paw the ground. The beasts always grow restless as a Shattering looms.

Farther. Out into the endless maelstrom of the sky, a sky that looks so still but which is a seething turmoil of currents and breezes and updrafts and thermals—and Zeth feels it all. When he is this deep in the Song, his senses inform him of movement with the same inevitability that his body informs him of pain. He knows the motion of the islands below and the islands below those, slotting around each other in their endless sliding puzzle. The bowing of trees on those islands' backs and the running of creatures through those trees and the stirring of the fur on those creatures' bodies—

—and the movement of human bodies across the surface of an island. Not Menet Var. Another island, smaller, faster. Approaching.

Raiders. Zeth's breathing stutters and he almost wrenches himself out of the Song, but he presses his teeth together and keeps concentrating. He's let his senses stretch too far, and too unfocused. He can't get lost in the Song and he can't, he *mustn't* think about raiders, not with a Shattering impending. So he swallows down the gasp he'd like to make and forces out words. 'Someone's out there.'

He feels, rather than sees, Shara nod and pull her bow down from her back. She will keep Zeth safe—she *will*—so he wrenches his Song-sense away from those moving forms and back out into the sky.

And—there. There it is, the heavy press against his awareness of something huge, solid, moving. The crash and break of the wind against it as it comes nearer and nearer and nearer.

Zeth opens his eyes. The oncoming island is larger now, a dark smear the size of his hand. Time always slips by fast when he's in the Song.

'Ten minutes,' Shara says.

The dark mass expands before them, and Zeth wraps it in his awareness as if in imaginary threads. He feels every angle and plane of its rocks. He knows it. He holds it.

The island swells in the sky before them. Closer. Closer.

Now.

Zeth gathers all of that massive, roaring momentum, and hurls

the full weight of his will against it. He begs it to stop—and some sliver of his mind flinches from his concentration, reaches out toward where it remembers those maybe-raiders being.

His invisible grip slips. The island glides on.

Zeth deals himself a mental kick and re-gathers his focus. Reaches for every shard of rock and wisp of grass that makes up his mindless enemy, and strains against their collective motion. He can't afford to be a child afraid of raiders, and even if that's what he is, it doesn't *matter*. His people need him. No. They need their Songmaster.

And a Songmaster isn't a person, really, isn't someone with pain or things to fear. A Songmaster is a conduit for energy. Because this is the tenet of Wind-Singing, the truth of reality that Zeth has spent all twenty-two years of his life on Menet Var fighting to understand and learning to bend: all things in motion remain in motion. Unless some other force acts against them.

Zeth is that force, and he commands: *no further*.

The island drags itself forward—and slows.

And slows, and slows, as Zeth stands at the cliff-edge in its path. He drops any awareness of his own body, narrows his senses until they bring him nothing but the island, and inch by inch he Sings it to a stop. It's so close that he can make out every individual tree on its surface, but it's hanging frozen in the sky before them. Well. Not frozen, really, because it's roaring against Zeth's unseeable grip, fighting to move again.

It will *not* move again.

So as Menet Var slides slowly by its would-be destroyer, Zeth clings to that shuddering mass and holds it still. Still, until his vision is blurring (but that's okay, because he doesn't need to see for this) and his whole body is wracked with shakes (but he doesn't need a body either). He holds and holds, and it's fighting him, and it's so huge, so full of strength and so desperate to move, and—

'We're past it. Let go.'

Zeth releases the tethers of his awareness, and his senses snap back to their normal limits like taut ropes cut. He doubles over so that Shara has to pull him back from the cliff, and sinks to his knees. Which was stupid, because now there's snow soaking into his trouser legs. But oh, Eshra, he's tired, and the world always feels so sickeningly still when he emerges from the Song.

Something brushes his face. It takes him a moment to realise that Shara's holding the flask in front of him, releasing steam onto his skin.

‘All right. Before we deal with whoever’s out there, have some tea.’

Zeth grips the flask and drinks until it’s empty. Then he kneels in the snow and watches the island that almost destroyed his home sail silently onward, until it drifts into cloud and is gone.

Kaylen Forsyth



Kaylen Forsyth is a writer from Maryport, West Cumbria. She explores the concept of hometowns frequently in her writing, examining how deeply connected we are to the landscapes of childhood long after we grow and leave them behind. She likes to write about other things too: illness, the sea, outsiders, memory, ghostly encounters and Pernod, to name but a few, and has previously been published by *The Common Breath* and *Eunoia Review*. In 2020, she won the Edmund Cusick Avalon Award for Poetry. She is currently working on her first novel.

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Later, Pond

won't look the way it looks now.
Sunrays streak when afternoon hits.

As a child, I did not know this,
how Pond came to be sliced into bits.

But it's early now, the sun still sleeps
and Pond waits for me unstreaked.

It waits down in the marshes,
the ones by Pa's old house.

Pond was never blue, but almost
—once a delicate kind of green.

Today, as brown as the earth beside
it: those dark and crumbling banks.

When someone who was breathing one day
stops, why does Pond have to grieve it?

Leaves and litter cover the surface now,
though the wind soon blows them

into flight, and Pa's water lilies all ruined,
with no-one around to dead-head—

I could try, but wouldn't get it right.

Two Moths

I don't know why I started crying, the sight of something so ordinary: two common clothes moths. But with me, breaking down, often it does not take much. (One Sunday, when I should have been reading *The Passion*, I was making a boy some eggs and cried. That an egg should leave me weeping. I had cracked it, and instead of deep, pure gold—a blackened trail.)

At first, the moths were not aware of one and other. I was not yet crying, but as soon as they moved together, my mouth was made of trembles. What inside of me was it—the thing that came undone? I don't know but something did, like food coming away from a dinner plate, held for a while under a hot tap.

The moths' love was a desperate smothering. I watched their need. Their act. Their wild pyretic clutching. Still crying, I edged even closer, as though proximity to wanting could somehow make me a thing that's wanted. Then, they were done, that was it, they let go of each other. One stayed on the arm of the sofa, the other flew off. I mean it was hardly sex. I thought so, at first, but more like masturbating using each other's bodies. I should never have cried in the first place, but sometimes I let things inside of me, little details. I don't know how to let them back out.

Horses on the Hill

All day I've cut wood for the stove watched horses on the hill
brace against wind there is something about their legs I can make
 out
the muscles from a distance but if I walk closer they look fragile

All day I've made this place a sort of comfortable a sort of festive
garlands from the beams pretended your prognosis
does not intersect with Christmas I've salted ham, put on The
 Pogues
coughed over every sensitive line ... *an old man said to me...*

All day I've done everything everyone told me to stood back
 let you wash your own hair and soon you'll be putting you to bed
 then another day beneath the hill cutting wood watching wild
 horses
 steady in the wind maybe one day change maybe a dog
 rushes down splits the herd in two

Glass of Water

A dying man
once wrote in a poem
that he was afraid of death
because he wouldn't
be able to drink water anymore.
I've forgotten who.

Tall, cool glass of water.
I keep seeing that phrase around—
tall, cool glass of water.
I think it is spectacular wording.
I think it makes me want
to be alive.

Paul Has a Conversation with a Ghost

The ghost has the anatomy of an old man
but with breasts that are softer than mine, and rounder.
Paul, who is virginal, who has never seen real breasts before,
is pouring himself a glass of milk
while I stand in the corner, uncurious.
He watches the ghost, waiting for it to speak
but no words come, only movements. It signals
with its wet face—lacquered eyebrows and dripping lips—
a whole head slick with amniotic fluid.
Its expressions are surprising yet timid.
Ghosts are afraid like my mother.

I tell Paul we should leave, but he says nothing.
He has forgotten me. Obsessed,
he moves towards the ghost and
when he gets too close, they touch,
causing it to concave into a sphere.
Paul picks it up like a beachball,
or maybe something with more flesh, like a baby.
He rocks it back and forth,
gesturing words in its spectral language.
'Paul, speak!' I cry. 'Paul, please! Say something quickly,
before you lose the name of your mother.'

Nick Guidez



Nick Guidez is a London-based writer whose current work explores the spaces between reality and perception. Where his poetry looks inward, his prose looks outward onto how we perceive and experience the landscapes and relationships around us. After living in Australia for a number of years, he returned to his passion of writing and reading at the Manchester Centre of New Writing.

The following extract is two short passages from his work-in-progress autofiction novel *AFTER TIME*, which interweaves three narratives in which the protagonist, in different states of mind and circumstance, pushes against/leans into the outside world. The novel aims to untether and play with the line between fact and fiction, reality and artifice.

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AFTER TIME

ONE/AFTER

I was walking in a leafy southern suburb of London when a scene devolved in front of me in almost perfect silence. A cyclist attired in skin-tight fluorescent clothing collided into a parked car, going over the bonnet and crumpling into the windshield. It was like a Chaplin movie; a comedy or a tragedy, depending on your role in or perspective of the scene. I realised it had not unravelled in silence but instead, my music had finished and my noise-cancelling headphones were actually now functioning like mufflers. I slipped them off, revealing the noise of traffic and the faint moans of the now-standing cyclist, nursing his arm, and the concerned quick-fire questions of a stranger closer to him. The cars in the small but busy road continued in their journeys, unsurprisingly unconcerned or unaware of what had just happened.

I was on my way to meet Dan, a friend I hadn't seen for months, not since my return from Manchester. He had recently gotten married, in Essex of all places, and after a short honeymoon in Mexico had returned to London and to his city job in advertising. I had not a big role in his wedding, only as a guest, as an onlooker, which had made me initially sad but suited me on the day, for I had gotten drunk, having gone alone and therefore being the only single one out of our friendship group, and had to excuse myself embarrassingly early.

It was just coming up to spring, a season that suited living in London better than the grey swathes of winter. The early morning light was crisp, and it seemed to sharpen the green of the street's foliage, the sky a pale blue that stretched uninterrupted. I kept walking down the road, now listening to the incessant traffic noise of London, something even the poshest suburbs could not price out. For every artisanal

bakery, for every specialist espresso bar, there were trucks delivering them supplies, maintenance men working on the winter-cracked roads, waste removal trucks making their pickups. I watched a man lean against his delivery van and light a cigarette. He held his eyes shut as he took the first drag and for a second, I didn't think he would ever open them again, but he did and exhaled the smoke in a thin dense stream.

I got to the café we had agreed to meet at, which was minimalist in décor: pale wood benches and stools, with overhanging greenery, walls adorned with unobtrusive prints of contemporary abstract art. In an open booth along the far wall, I saw Dan seated, looking into a mug of what I assumed was coffee on the table in front of him. The steam from his mug played with the lines of his face, making him almost mirage-like. I went to the counter and ordered an expensive oat milk mocha from the younger-than-me barista, whose serious, knowing, warm demeanour was a new style of hospitality emerging in London's hipster businesses. I took my order number, seventeen, and joined Dan. We hugged tightly as we said hello; he was one of my rare male friends who actually hugged you when you embraced, rather than the typical male-to-male half contact. Dan was actually drinking green tea, the water an off-white colour, appealing only in its steaming warmth. He looked good as he started to speak about his honeymoon. His ginger hair was thickly coifed to his right, and his skin was slightly tanned, noticeable only from close proximity, both literally and relationship-wise.

'And how's Matty?' I asked after the barista had delivered my coffee. Matty was his now-wife, and he smiled and spoke excitedly about the house they had just found in between Watford and London, and he showed me a picture of it. It was the kind of new-build typical of the commuter belt of London, the sort of building complex I particularly disliked for their lack of character and dull coherence. I smiled as he scrolled through the glossy professional pictures.

The barista barely looked up as we left. Dan lamely put up his hand to say goodbye but quickly put it down once it wasn't acknowledged. We were now walking along the same road I had walked from, Dan tightly wrapped up, his thick scarf fluttering behind him in the slightly kicked-up wind.

'And how are you with everything?' he finally asked, a question that had been drifting between us since I sat down. He was the second friend I saw after the worst of my time before; I still remember his grave look and hug, the cigar he had curiously brought me as a gift, and

the vegan burgers we had, tucked into a dirty corner of a busy inner-London *Leon*. My inability to talk about anything since then had relinquished itself a little, but there was still a flickering barrier between us, imposed by me.

'I'm better,' I said after a moment, looking at him to show it was true. He half-smiled and pulled his flagging scarf tighter.

'You look better,' he said as we turned into one of the small, leafy parks typical of this part of London, lined with tall, overly expensive Victorian-period housing. 'You've put on weight,' he continued. It was true—the months back at my mother's house, plus a trip to my father's in France, had fattened me up again after months of not eating properly. I wore the weight, in my mind, badly; my chin losing its definition and my average height exaggerating the weight gain around my waist.

He took out a cigarette and offered me one. I shook my head and waited for Dan to light his, which he struggled to do in the kicked-up wind paired with his cheap lighter. We sat down on a park bench and watched people drift by; most of them on their phones, talking and laughing with someone on the other end or scrolling, digesting some sort of information, personal or other, through their screen. I was just as hooked on my phone. My brain was now rewired to experience little hits of happiness at the sight of notifications, and no matter my attempts, I had yet been able to wean myself off my phone, crucial as it is to living today.

'Have you seen what's happening?' Dan asked and took out his phone to show the running story on *The Guardian*. There was the header picture of the aftermath of a bomb, which was, in fact, a slideshow of pictures: the next a picture of a flag hoisted into the air; the next was of a woman holding a child, both crying; the next was of a white journalist standing awkwardly at the site. I looked away and Dan paused and then clicked his screen off. I had skimmed the reports about what was happening but hadn't delved fully into what was happening. To be able to lightly read or to simply ignore the news was a choice privilege afforded, and one, to my shame, I sometimes exercised, especially in the past year.

We said our goodbyes around lunchtime after Dan had checked his phone one too many times for it not to be some sort of sign of eagerness to get somewhere else. I sat back down on the bench as I watched him go; slightly taller than me, far slimmer, with an assured step that developed more and more since he had met Matty well over two years ago. I sat on the bench for a while longer and let the world

around me pass me by. People on their lunch breaks or on their bikes or walking their dogs went past, hurried in their own lives, indifferent but not cold towards me, as I let the wind sting my face. I knew the day was stretching overhead and wondered where to walk to next.

ONE/DURING

I touched down in Paris almost exactly two hours after we were meant to arrive. The plane was full of French people complaining about the delay. My seat neighbour was a small, pokey woman who had kept solemnly quiet throughout the turbulent forty-five-minute journey from Manchester.

As we disembarked, I walked behind her. She was now reunited with a friend who had been sitting away from her, and I heard her tell her friend about me. ‘He kept sighing,’ she said in hushed Parisian French. ‘I wonder why?’ she continued as we made our way down the clanking walkway into the airport.

Because of the delay, I had to walk to another terminal to collect my baggage. The connected walkway was an old multi-coloured hallway, dominated by the moving human conveyor belt in the middle.

‘Maybe he was ill?’ her friend answered her as they walked further from me. The other woman’s answer was too faint to be made out over the clatter of footsteps.

At the same time as our bags were coming, so were bags from a plane from Tokyo. As its passengers waited, I noticed they were all wearing masks—mostly surgical-style ones—and were standing in small, distanced clumps. My fellow passengers had moved to the far side of the baggage belt and were side-eyeing those passengers, mostly Asian, who were waiting for their bags.

As I waited alone, the knot in my stomach was tightening, then loosening, with each passing bag that looked like mine but wasn’t. The dread that moved through me, bubbling through my stomach like bad food, had built and spread in the ever-stretching delay. Knowing that my father had waited two hours already for me to arrive—and was still waiting—was enough to make me feel like an errant child again.

I didn’t really want to shine a light on everything, especially here, waiting in this airy, dimly lit baggage reclaim hall in this chaotic airport. The room was large and contained a number of conveyor belts, marked

only by large neon letters. As I waited at B, I looked down the hall. The different conveyor belts almost looked like one long track, seeming as if you were to miss your bag, it would have to travel all the way down the room, along all the conveyors, in front of all the hungry and tired travellers and their seeking hands, before making the long journey back to you. I'm sure it was not, that there was a sophisticated system behind the wall that separated us from the airport mechanisms, but I found myself twitching towards and glaring at every passing bag even if it was a colour, unlike mine.

All the important things were in my hand luggage, and this gave me some calmness as I waited. In it was my medication—a strong antidepressant that curiously increases suicidal ideation before reducing it—and my phone, passport, and wallet. When I prepared for this trip—my first to France in almost five years—I didn't know what to pack, how many clothes to take, whether I could do laundry at my father's.

My baggage finally came, and the knot tightened as I picked it up and began to make my way to the exit, tightening until I couldn't walk. At that point, I wanted to cry. I wasn't sure whether it was for myself, for the woman I had sat next to, for the surgically masked passengers of the other flight, for the way we had treated them by keeping our distance, or whether it was for everything and something else, something lost floating in the space above us.

I stood in the middle of the exit, holding my hand luggage and small suitcase and felt the crowds of people shift around me as they exited—some quickly dragging their suitcases and some strolling arm-in-arm with loved ones. The exit doors—big sliding doors that opened to a crowd of waiting people—took on almost a cinematic quality. It felt like some sort of played-out scene in which you are romantically reunited with someone, or you find a long-lost member of family in a tear-jerking scene of feel-goodness. The colours within the opened door, the noises of chatter and movement, sounded staged, as if they projected or played from a speaker that intermittently cut out. But neither of these were true, and this wasn't a film, and I knew I had to step into the heat and colour of the scene ahead.

After a moment or longer, I dragged my feet and left the baggage hall and entered to the bright lights of the main terminal room. I scanned the crowd, pressed up against barriers that marked the travellers from the locals. I caught sight of my father's face; his face neutral as he looked down at his phone. I walked up and he noticed me,

and a smile came over him. He gave me a large hug and the customary double-cheek kiss.

As we walked to his car parked in one of the underground car parks, I explained to him the delay and why I was so late, but he didn't seem bothered. It was the first time I had come to France since I was twenty-one and it felt almost lifeless coming through the airport instead of the Gare du Nord, which was always bustling with shouts and arguments and the horns of cars and people asking for cigarettes. To step out of the cool of the station into the heat of Paris, its sun-baked pavements and narrow crooked streets lined with buildings that seemed to loom overhead, felt like coming home. Instead, it was dark now—it being early evening in February—and as we left the airport it was straight onto the motorway out of Paris, I realised that I had both missed and grown apart from it. It was a city that doubly felt like home and strange to me with every visit; the more I got to know the city, the less I felt like I actually knew it, and that I was a mere tourist parading around as a local, despite it being my birthplace.

'You're quiet,' he said to me after a time driving. The car, which was originally my late Papie's, was an old beat-up Renault that struggled to go over sixty. Towards the end of his life, where he stubbornly insisted he could still drive despite his right eye being almost entirely closed because of the tumour, he had dinged and dented the car more times than any family member cared to count. I felt the vibrations underfoot of the car straining to speed up and felt strangely reassured.

'I'm just tired,' I said after a while. I had seen my father straight after the worst of my episode—he had come to England suddenly and taken care of me whilst I had been unable to get out of bed and everything had been foggy—and I felt strangely embarrassed. He had seen me cry, perhaps for the first time since I was a boy, and as he drove, I looked down at my hands, sweaty and clasped together on my lap.

He started talking about his new home with his partner, a woman whom I had never met despite them having been together for over four years now. We turned off the motorway onto a small main road towards the town where he lived. One of his partner's daughters, who was slightly younger than me, was also there, and this added a new dimension to my worry. As he spoke in his quick French, I spent half the time listening and the other staring out of the window. As we drove a white flash suddenly lit up the car and he swore.

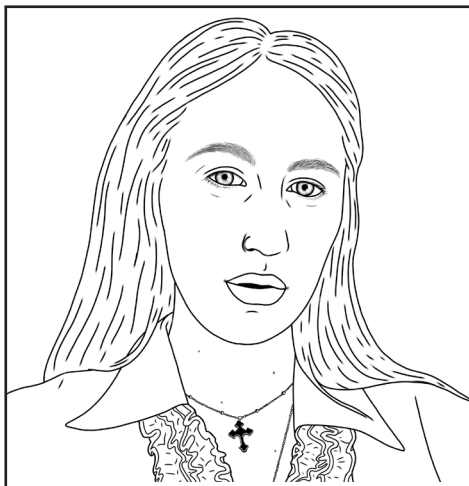
'Was that us?' he asked.

AFTER TIME

'I don't think so,' I lied before I could really catch myself from doing it. 'There was a car going the opposite direction,' I continued, despite myself. This was my fault, I told myself. If I hadn't come, he wouldn't have been flashed, he wouldn't receive a fine later, and with that, a feeling of dread washed over me.

But to my surprise he kept on talking about everyday stuff—his garden, my grandma, her new flat, his potential new job—and the wave of dread eased a little as he eased the car back into fifth and the lights of the road blurred overhead.

Abigail Shaw



Abigail Shaw is a writer from the Wirral. She made the grand return to Manchester for her MA, having received a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing at UoM three years prior.

Abigail writes poetry, short fiction, and creative non-fiction. Currently, she is working on a fiction anthology based on the album *In an Aeroplane Over the Sea*.

While her poetry tends to thrive in dark and liminal spaces, she also takes inspiration from her wonderful family and the natural world—though her intensity is palpable whatever the subject matter. From notes on nostalgia in ‘A Minute More’ to the sobering message of ‘The Drink’, these poems aim to indulge in language—to be taken over by it.

Abigail now seeks representation, new opportunities in writing for commission, and further freelance work. She enjoys the sound of rain, cool handbags, and religious iconography in vampire films.

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The Ambulance

I'm not that skeleton they found.
I'm not the pile of naked branches
in which children have built their second homes.
I wasn't alive for the Holocaust so
I'm not a sallow bar of soap. I don't
have the waxy skin of a marionette.
I'm not the one holding Dad's hand,
I don't have clasped white knuckles.
I'm not stealing ten pounds from
your dresser—or fifty, or a hundred.
I'm not still doing that.
I didn't call Mum a cunt the first Christmas
she locked me out. I'm not trapped
in the reflection of a glistening knife's-edge.
This isn't the fifth time.
I haven't been wading in water; I'm no
untapped vein. The morning, it breaks.
I'm not walking into the light to leave,
I don't want to be free-floating, caught
in God's hands or a tractor beam.
In my bed, I wake up screaming:
I want my life; I want my life.

A Minute More

A brownie-camp sun suggests
nostalgia can be felt in the weather,
or in the hand, outstretched and motoring
through velociraptor grass. In the
biscuit tin that hides the pins to sew the sash.
In pigtails or bunkbeds or walking
two by two through churchyards,
little mites and midges, up to their knees
in a stream. First summers of heat and grass,

the sweet smell of cow parsley, or was it hemlock
in the hedgerows. Or perhaps it can be found in the sound
of frozen peas in a metal pan. In a caravan evening,
the bruised dusk over Ullswater. Or under
a great steel bridge in the claws of a crayfish,
in the condensation collected on luminous cagoules.
It can be found in chin-tucked looks down to Mum
tying shoes. The heather-struck hills, the
beckoned fingers of furled ferns,

hidden away in senescent wood all fat and bowing
from the hot rain. A whippersnapper candle
suggests it can be felt in the fumbled light
gathered in the hearth. Or in the fermented
wet soil down the garden path, the pique of the
steady drip, an uncharismatic roof. It can be found
in the primordial slime of my racing snails,
the slippery oafs, their chase laid.
Alone in the low light, I was squinting and sheathed
in a sleeping bag, cheering them on.

Before

Once, we were in the devil's smithy
no more a hospital than ground is sky.
Groaned around the stench of a lanced boil,
sweated dark cuts by candlelight.

Trusted gold touch piece, clutched for
healing. Leeches melancholy, drained
phlegm. Clenched jaw around a wooden
spoon screaming, the heavy pant of saw.

The noise of it all, wailed confessions to Mary,
bewitched leg flecked with rhubarb powder,
juniper water and mustard oil. Vain faith placed
in vinegar-soaked cloth, lain down heavy

with another lead cross. But here is our divine future:
with a surgeon's hands inside her head a woman will
continue to sing. Gratitude is buried with all
your dead; she will not feel a thing.

The Drink

the drink that i was handed was an amaretto coke
you can pop a balloon with just a little poke
i left my hometown to make myself some friends
you can kill a flower just by cutting off the stem

he serves me at the checkout, he's helped me change a tire
have you ever seen a fox that's been caught in chicken wire?
the screaming of its struggle as summer bubbles him to soup
wire cutter pity and he'll thank you in the coop

the drink that i was handed was the dirty blood of christ
and what i had between my legs was girlish sacrifice
i never got to realise what was special about sex
before i became half part of the half things that you left

the drink that i was handed was a glass of dry white wine
the drink that i was handed was tequila sans the lime
the drink that i was handed was the skeletal remains of
who took the drink before me all the girls without a

name. the drink that i was handed was a bowl of lukewarm spit
and rape me by nirvana was playing in 8-bit
skin as white as milk, skin so quick to spoil
I am curdled, I am creamy, I am split, as slick as oil

the drink that i was handed was a virgin white russian
you can bruise a peach with the sound of percussion
you can stain a bed only with a drop of ink
you can waste a woman by handing her a drink.

The Truth Is Out There

Me and Fox Mulder are in a cahoots
crisis. With me, in bits, dismissed
from the spacecraft. And him,
on the TV, adjusting the contrast.

No, I wasn't around for those cattle
mutilations. My post pile, sour milk,
and dead fish need addressing. I brush
my teeth thrice for each hour I find missing.

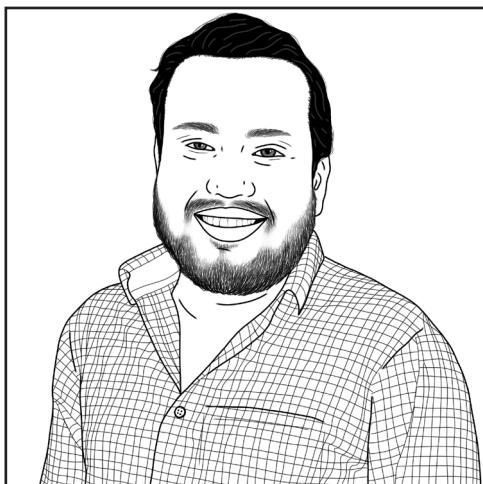
Mulder insists I'm a victim, my remote
mutes his screams, with ease, while
I'm tracing crop circles in the dust on
the screen. Do you think that I'm spooky?
I see me as lucky! Though, of course,

very concerned with the disappearance of
Scully. Gone in a flush—my meds
just never agreed with the feds
or the aliens or the talking TV.

So, now we see it, hovered on the horizon
there's a van parked outside
offering 'Flooring By Ivan'
but after the sighting

I'm not frightened,
I don't panic; both Mulder and I
evaporate into static.

Arpan Chatterjee



Arpan Chatterjee was born in India. Having worked as an engineer, he decided to pursue his true passion and study creative writing. He writes about people from underrepresented backgrounds and explores themes related to caste, religion, race, colour, migration, diaspora, and belongingness. He lives in Toronto with his two dogs.

Arpan's novel-in-progress, *The Subalterns*, is a socio-political novel based in Mumbai. Anil is a struggling actor who is looking for his breakthrough. Isma, a latrine cleaner, loses her job and resorts to begging in a temple pretending to be blind. Shukla is a Shankara-Sena party worker and wants to eradicate Love Jihad. One day, a bomb blast at the temple injures Isma and leads to riots in the city, and Shukla gets a party ticket for the upcoming elections. But their lives intertwine when Anil finds a video showcasing a Shankara-Sena party worker planting the bomb.

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The Subalterns

Anil

‘Jai Shri Ram...Bharat mata ki jai,’ echoes the chant as the crowds enter Naim Nagar. Anil runs to the balcony to get a better view, his father already sitting there with his copy of the *Sangbad Patrika*, two cups of chai, and a plateful of chanachur. They come in vans and trucks by the numbers and swarm the Muslim community. Hundreds arrive on foot holding orange flags bearing the sigil of the Prince of Ayodhya. Their leader can be seen walking within a barricade of bikers who occasionally rev up their engines in unison.

‘Come, sit, watch the drama unfold,’ says Anil’s father, grabbing a handful of chanachur. ‘These idiots have nothing else to do.’

The brigade stops at the centre of the chowk. A tall man in a white kurta steps onto a 4x4 cement slab next to a telegraph pole. People look from their verandas, patios, gardens, foyers, and balconies. Some even peep from the slits in their bathroom windows, but no one ventures out.

‘Who is he, baba?’ asks Anil.

‘Do you even live in this country? You don’t know the *famous* Sanjay Lodhi?’ asks his father.

‘Why is he famous?’

‘Just shut up and watch.’

The crowd steps aside when a priest is ushered towards the makeshift podium. He walks around the telegraph pole, figuring out the ideal vantage point in case a riot breaks out, lays down his aasan, and starts reciting prayers. A crackle emanates from the horn loudspeaker fitted atop the telegraph pole—the pole itself subjected to holy water of the Ganges sprinkled from the priest’s metal pot. Shutters are being drawn at every shop—the shopkeepers pleading and urging customers

to vacate the stools in front of their shops—except at Ashim tea stall, where the proprietor, Ashim Kundu, feeling the tingling of an unannounced business opportunity, lays down two more benches and requests passersby to ‘please come’ and ‘please sit’ while thrusting cups of chai into their hands.

‘Where is the idol? I mean, what are they praying to?’ asks Anil.

‘They pray to whatever serves their purpose,’ says his father.

‘Is he offering prayers to the pole?’

‘They will offer prayers to dog shit if it pushes their agenda.’

An iron gate opens, and a convoy of men step out of a run-down bungalow. Their white skullcaps shine against the dazzling sun as they march towards the podium.

‘Here we go, the Imam is coming,’ says Anil’s father. ‘This will be interesting. Sandhya, come join us.’

‘You guys enjoy your politics. I have bigger fish to fry,’ says Anil’s mother from the kitchen. ‘The masala is not yet cooked.’

Anil moves to the corner of the balcony to get a closer look. Leading the group is a short man in a black robe with a black turban. His scruffy white beard sways against the wind as he walks, gasping for breath. A murmur spreads through the crowd as his followers surround him.

‘All it takes is a slight push, a poke with a stick, a gentle prod, or someone addressing the circumcision, and that should do it,’ says Anil’s father. ‘All hell will break loose. Go make sure the doors are locked.’

Anil rushes to the front door and unlocks and locks the door, all the while imagining how the Imam’s army would fare against such a large crowd. A riot is nowhere on his agenda—he still has to practise the speech for his film. Mehboob Studios is at the other end of the city, and he will have to wake up early to get a head start. Everyone wants a head start in Mumbai.

Anil sits back on his chair as the Imam approaches the podium. A strange excitement can be seen on people’s faces, everyone seems to be on edge.

‘Please come, Imam sahab,’ says Lodhi, positioning the microphone between them.

‘It’s time for the azaan to start. What do you want, Lodhi ji?’ asks the old man, the creases on his forehead deepening as he stands bemused watching the priest offer flowers to the pole.

‘I want the same thing as you—peace and progress of my country.’

‘Yes indeed, we will do whatever needs to be done for the

betterment of our country.’

‘You don’t belong here. Go back to Pakistan,’ comes a voice from the crowd. This causes an uproar: plates are banged, *laathis* are struck, several claps in approval. A gunshot can be heard in the distance followed by the chanting of ‘Har Har Mahadev’.

Sanjay Lodhi grins as he moves closer to the microphone. ‘Imam sahab, I have come to reiterate the recent laws passed by the government. I just want to speak to the people,’ he says, tapping the microphone twice, ‘you know I hate violence.’

‘This is a democratic country, and you are one of our leaders. We don’t want any trouble, that’s all,’ says the old man as he recedes to his quarters.

Anil starts livestreaming the event on Facebook. He has recently seen a surge in his online followers which has left his parents overwhelmed and scared. They have always been private people with a stern belief that the internet is where the devil resides, and one should ensure that one’s personal life is kept hidden behind the curtains. But the dopamine hit has been too hard for him to resist, his brain urging him to continue streaming to garner a reputation different from reality. Having thought about the hashtags from his repertoire, he goes ahead with *#LoveJihad* and *#LodhiInNaimNagar*.

The priest approaches Lodhi and starts hurling gibberish at his face, the voice reaching its crescendo at regular intervals as if he was born for such occasions. Flowers are thrown at Lodhi’s feet as the priest puts a *teeka* on his forehead. A thunderous clap reverberates through the crowd. Lodhi motions the priest to move aside as he faces the spectators. Unhooking the microphone from the stand, he clears his throat: ‘Jai Shri Ram.’

The crowd responds by chanting the phrase over and over, each time louder than before as if trying to wake up Lord Ram from his slumber. A few shouts can be heard from the balconies and the gardens while orange flags emerge from the patios and across the rooftops as people step out of their houses and join the gathering.

‘You see beta, *this* is acting,’ says Anil’s father. ‘Learn from him, see how he sucks in the crowd.’

‘Did maa have a similar effect during her performances?’ asks Anil.

His father smiles. ‘Your mother is one of the finest actors I’ve ever seen. Those Kapoor-shapoors should learn from Sandhya. The way she acted, *ab ba ba...*’

‘Then why did she stop acting, baba?’

His father stands up and walks to the railing. The police have arrived in their jeeps and surrounded the exit points. Anil watches a constable raising his laathi and ushering the kids back inside their compounds. A group of female constables stand in front of the dhobi’s hut with the dhobi peeping from behind their safety net. The elderly evening-walk comrades, who until now were busy discussing India’s rise as a superpower at Ashim tea stall, turn their stools and face Lodhi, who waves a hand and signals the crowd to settle down.

‘I am sure you have all heard about the new laws passed by the government,’ says Lodhi. No one utters a word. Even the street dogs listen in rapt silence. ‘The new laws restrict unlawful religious conversions through marriage. Simply put, it restricts anyone from a certain community, and I quote, “to forcefully convert a woman’s religion solely for the purpose of marriage, or by use of force, coercion or misrepresentation.” Do you understand what it implies?’

‘It means you will stay away from our mothers and sisters,’ says a voice, spitting paan.

‘Thank you, Das, but I think that’s too harsh. What this law intends is to ensure that no one is forced to marry outside their community. That’s how God intended as well. And it always does good to obey God’s will, doesn’t it?’

Das spits a long red jet of betel juice as a group of urchins run past him, past the run-down building, past the elderly comrades, past the dhobi’s hut chasing a street dog—the dog ducking its tail as it runs looking for respite. Stones are hurled from the crowd as the dog dives inside a gutter.

‘Rest assured, there is nothing to fear,’ continues Lodhi. ‘We are a secular country, and everyone is free to practise and preach any religion. What we don’t want are forceful religious conversions.’

‘This feels just like the ’80s all over again,’ says Anil’s father. ‘They say things like this before the election and once the election is over and they have won, KABOOMMMMMMM.’ His baritone makes the KABOOM sound more intense. ‘This is history repeating itself. It will only go downhill from here.’

‘You really believe they are going to come down hard on us?’ asks Anil.

‘Oh no, not on *us*. We are Hindus.’

Anil looks at his phone. Only two people have joined his livestream. One is his friend Ismail, who asks whether he has nothing

else to do. Ismail was one of those philanderers who could be spotted around the university campus whistling at girls and smoking joints but is now a successful lawyer at Kareem & Associates. They had discussed dropping out of university and following their passion, had argued about how engineers sprouted from every crevice of India, and how the system limited people's choices.

Anil feels enraged. He thinks of blocking Ismail—Ismail, with his unbuttoned shirts and bell-bottom pants, is now a lawyer. He wonders where he fell short; he had read the right books, had followed the chronology as the research suggested, had his share of failures and embarrassments, yet why did it take him so long just to land a role in a short film? Fuck Ismail! He re-shares the livestream link on his timeline with #SanjayLodhi.

'We have heard reports of several such people hiding in this neighbourhood. People, who are a shame to your community, and our country. Just help us catch these terrorists.'

'What happened in the '80s, baba?' asks Anil.

'It was a disaster. Once Indira Gandhi was assassinated, it was absolute mayhem. Back then, it was the Sikhs under attack, after which they got to the Muslims in '92. It's a cycle,' says his father, eyeing him through his glasses. 'Don't they teach you all this at school? Maybe you should learn some actual history.'

Anil decides to Google it later. He wonders how he, an adult Indian citizen, is unaware of historical events of such magnitude. He has read about the Gandhi family but has never been taught about the massacres baba mentioned. They were never in the syllabus! He feels cheated, as if they had removed pages from Indian history—pages which feel important, pages which apparently are an accurate reflection of history repeating itself.

Anil watches a bearded man whisper in Lodhi's ears as Lodhi covers the microphone with his hands. The man shakes Lodhi's hands and walks away as the crowd makes way for him. He strolls without any urgency, almost leisurely. His bike gurgles to a start, ejecting black fumes as he pushes down the kickstart and exits the chowk.

There is only one member in the livestream. He checks the name—*Psychedelic Fratboy*. Surely, it's some random lousy guy, or a druggie off his meds, or an unemployed good-for-nothing living with his parents. He couldn't care less. The livestream has become a failure. He has to find another way to be relevant. Maybe Twitter?

His mobile phone chimes. It is his sister.

Have you gone mad? Why would you livestream such a thing? Does maa know?

He knows he has to stop; there is no winning against maa. The azaan begins in the backdrop, a dusky voice emanating from the horn loudspeaker. He has grown up listening to the prayers, has wondered what they meant. He remembers the librarian's raised eyebrows followed by his stern line of questioning when Anil tried borrowing the Quran from the local library—the lanky old man wanted to know why would a Hindu brahmin boy be interested in something so blasphemous.

Anil stands up when he sees someone climbing the pole and unscrewing the loudspeaker. The crowd chants, the engines rev, the cars honk, drums are beaten, slogans are shouted as the man adjusts his body on the pole and cuts the wire to the loudspeaker. The prayer stops. Only a hushed tone can be heard radiating from the mosque.

'This is just the beginning. Tomorrow they will cut it from inside the mosque,' says his father. Anil looks around his neighbourhood—Naseer chacha sitting on the balcony with his head between his hands, Javed being pushed inside by his abba, Dr Mukherjee locking his clinic and ushering his family inside while the Imam stared from his doorstep. He knows he has to say something. The urge is irresistible. He tweets:

Is there no end to this bigotry? What have we become? Our secularism is under threat #LoveJihad #LodhiInNaimNagar #Fascism

Isma

I wake up to the tap-tap of water dripping from the faucet. I had put Lata's mug underneath it the night before, but someone must have stolen that. The sun is almost up, and I will have to get up for namaaz, but my body is stiff from yesterday. All that *gharar-gharar* from the Mumbai local gives me a sore back. The crows arrived before time today. They are singing at the tops of their voices, even when they can see that I am awake. All this *tap-tap* and *caw-caw* and *bhou-bhou* is making me go crazy.

I am fifth in line for the bathroom. I recognise three of them, but not the other one. Maybe she's new? I will try to find out tonight. At last, the BMC made these community bathrooms, I was tired of squatting in the grass; those spiky leaves hurt. Although, I do not understand the logic of five makeshift bathrooms with half-broken partitioned walls for around a thousand women in our area. Are we supposed to shower

in groups or shit holding each other? At times I peep through the cracks in the partition and stare—women sitting as if posing for a portrait on Juhu beach, a certain contentment on their faces, like it is their best time of the day, away from their drunk husbands or their nagging families.

I take my bucket and open the tin door. Inside, the light has been stolen, and the showerhead is broken. I place my bucket and hear the water whoosh out of the bent tap as I undress. Once, I had put my kameez on the partitioned wall and within a minute, it was gone. I shouted *thief, thief, help!* but was only met with roaring laughter. I cursed God that day for making me walk to my room half-naked, as if I was working as a prostitute again. But now, I am smart. I lay down a newspaper on the floor diagonally opposite the shower and put my clothes on it. Then I cover it with the other bucket I found at the ration store waiting in line for kerosene.

I try hearing who is next to me. Sounds like Seema, but I have been wrong before. The water feels chilly, as if they freeze it before sending it our way. The day hasn't even begun, and my armpits smell like cow-piss. I scrub my body with the two-rupee soap I bought at the temple stall until I feel the faint smell of rose around my shoulders. Someone is banging on the door and asking me to hurry. I pray to Allah for that day when I can be away from all these illiterate people with their loud voices and no manners, somewhere I belong.

Draping the kameez over my half-soaked body, I walk home. The five-minute walk feels like a ramp walk as men and children sit outside their huts staring at me from their charpoys and bamboo stools sipping chai or smoking a beedi. I wonder if they try to find out where my nipples are, or simply appreciate the roundness of my boobs or the curves of my buttocks. I walk with an added spring in my step when I see their wives around. How jealous they must be!

'We need to fix that tap,' I tell Seema as I enter our hut. It's the second day of load shedding in the mohalla.

'We need to fix the entire plumbing,' she says, 'but who will pay for it? I tried calling the plumber, but he never picks up.'

'What about Lata? I heard she roams around Malabar Hill these days. How's that working out for her?'

'Lata has not been home in two days. Maybe it's that England-return client of hers.'

'Since when is Twinkle amma assigning the high-demand areas to

newbies?’

‘I’ve heard that she does some magic with her tongue,’ says Seema, sticking out her tongue and rolling it around. ‘Apparently, the clients seem to enjoy it.’

‘I never understood these tongue-twisters, *uff*. For us, it was simple—strip and bang-bang,’ I say, trying to imagine Lata doing magic tricks with her rolled-out tongue in a P.C. Sorkar costume. ‘Anyway, I will see if I can get something.’

‘Please do, you are the only one amongst us who has a respectable job,’ says Seema. She rests on the charpoy staring at the ceiling and tapping her forefinger on her chest. Her hair is untied and flows across the pillow like a gentle wave. The top two blouse buttons have been undone exposing her white bra. Criss-cross marks appear on her waist from the jute mesh of the charpoy as she rolls over to her side.

‘How is cleaning people’s latrine respectable?’ I ask her.

‘It’s better than selling your soul,’ she says.

Marilyn Westenhouse



Marilyn Westenhouse is returning to writing after juggling a career in University Administration and raising a family. In an earlier incarnation, she worked in the press in South Africa. She is a keen sailor, having worked as a delivery crew and chartering in the Indian Ocean.

The *Careless Sky* is a novel based on actual events that took place in Somalia in the late 1970's, at the height of the Cold War. Beyond the scrutiny of the international press, conflicts on the fringes of the Western World left communities in Africa and South America damaged and divided.

Sailing on an idyllic voyage up the coast of Africa, four young yacht crew are caught up in one of these unwilling battlegrounds. Stranded by a storm, they find themselves in the one place they wanted to avoid. Captured by the Somali Security Police, they are exploited as pawns in a game of political power.

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The Careless Sky

Somalia—December 1976

The crests of the silver dunes shimmered over darkened troughs. The night breeze spilt trickles of burnished grains over the slowly shifting ridges.

The sound of an approaching vehicle carried on the cold air. Its engine roared and coughed, hot gears fighting the terrain. The headlights reared, sweeping searching across the dark sky. The beams swung up over a rise in a swirl of spitting sand.

Staring mesmerised into the yellow glare, a shapeless figure crouched. Then it turned, and flattening itself below the curve of the dune, it ran.

Excited laughter and shouts spilled from the cab. Yells of encouragement spurred the vehicle into pursuit.

‘Hyena eat you. Tell us truth.’ The male voice from the back of the vehicle was spiteful, struggling with the unfamiliar language. ‘We let hyena eat you.’

‘I have told you the truth.’ The girl’s voice was young and frightened.

‘Aamus.’ The older man demanded silence. ‘Halkan ku jooji,’ he barked the order and the jeep swerved to a stop. The two men who jumped out of the vehicle were wearing khaki military-style uniforms. The driver hurried around to open the front passenger door. The commander, epaulettes flashing heavy with rank, stepped down. He reached back into the vehicle and dragged the blonde female half falling onto the sand.

He gripped her upper arm one-handed, checking her at arm’s length. ‘We will leave you here and the animals will get you.’ His tone was controlled and, though accented, his English was fluent.

He pulled the girl beyond the feeble circle of the vehicle's interior light. He jolted her and she almost fell, her feet sucked awkwardly into the sinking sand. She cringed, twisting between his cruel hold and the darkness threatening. The sight of her fear amused the younger men and they laughed scornfully. The commander shoved the girl, releasing her. She staggered a few steps from the group.

'Kaalay.' The three men swung themselves back into the vehicle, slammed the doors, and it lurched off down the slope. The glow of the red taillights duck dived over the edge of a ravine. The sound of the retreating vehicle faded almost instantly in the deep folds of the topography.

The girl stood frozen, marooned in the emptiness of the desert night.

Somewhere off to her right, the hyena laughed, he had shaken off his pursuers and slowed to a lope.

Above, the cold impersonal vault of jewelled sky stretched, unyielding, uncaring.

The girl hunkered down. She looked at the place where the vehicle had vanished, glanced in the direction of the hyena's laugh, and turning in the opposite direction, broke into a faltering run. Her pace strengthened as she covered ground. She was fast, strong for her slender frame. On either side, the obscurity of dunes lurked. She glanced up the closest elevation. Making an instant decision, she deviated sharply, starting to climb the slope. The slipping sand filled her shoes, clutched at her trouser bottoms. Her breathe rasped with the exertion of pulling free, of lifting and placing each foot higher on the steep gradient. She flailed to the top. With a sob, she dropped to her knees.

In every direction, the featureless tumble of landscape stretched to blacked out horizons.

There, just above an edge of the inky sky, a bright white star glowed. And above it, another. Quickly, she located the other lights of the formation. She cried out in relief. She was not lost. As long as she could see that—the Southern Cross—she could find her way. Those months at sea, George had been showing her, showing the three of them, how the stars guided his navigation. The sky above was a map.

If she used what George had taught her, she could make her way back to him. She was no longer alone. She could hear his voice in her head. At the closeness of him, a sob choked in her throat. What had they done to him? She held her breath, slowly released the outbreath, paced the inhalation, forced herself to bring the panic under control.

She could use this rugged terrain, this darkness to hide her, to help her escape, to get to him.

Wiping her wet cheeks, she rose. She would make for the coast, go due east, keeping south on her right. When she reached the beach, she would find her way north, along the coast. The men had driven south leaving the village. She was sure of that.

She moved quickly, sliding on her bottom, her feet peddling, checking the downward momentum, her hands digging to pull herself up the next incline. Occasionally she brushed against one of the clumps of short prickly grass clinging low to the dunes, and an unfamiliar sweet fragrance wafted onto the night air.

Areas of levelled ground opened up between the dunes. She ran along these, keeping parallel to the slopes, resting her hammering heart and leaden legs. The moon was reaching its zenith. Cautiously she hopped over the deeply furrowed cracks and jutting stone outcrops thrown into stark relief, the mosaic of shadow and light guiding her steps. She could not afford to twist an ankle now.

The clunking of an engine drifted around the curve ahead of her. She squatted down. Was it the jeep returning? Could it be someone else passing? There was nowhere to take cover. The ascent above her was impossibly steep. Up there, the occupants of the car might not see her. But would they stop if she shouted after them? When she could be sure it was not the commander returning? Would they hear her? The hesitation cost seconds. She clambered straight up, frantically, cascades of contrasting silver and grey betraying the track of her flight. The slithering sand wave forced her back, dumping her floundering on the hardened verge. She leapt to her feet and started to run.

Rattling loudly, the vehicle jarred around the rutted bend. She shot a glance over her shoulder. She wailed as she recognised the outline of the jeep, the shapes inside straining towards her. The headlights surged forward. The beams, throwing blackness to either side, captured her in their narrow confines. The level ground widened, and the jeep swung past her to the right and circled back. Her shadow stretched, reaching grotesquely out towards the encircling dark. Engine revving, the vehicle closed the spiral. The girl dropped to her knees and flung her arms up to ward off the impact. The jeep skidded to a stop, almost touching the collapsed figure, billows of steaming oily air engulfing her. The doors banged open. The men jumped down, no longer laughing. They moved with purpose. The commander grabbed the girl and yanked her to her feet. She struggled back, pulling away from him.

'In. Get in.' He hoisted her up onto the front seat, climbing after her. A curt gesture beckoned the others to follow.

The men did not speak. The girl's sobs subsided to ragged breathing. Slowly she regained control. She glanced across at the driver. His face, uplit in the dashboard lights, was young, soft around the mouth. His eyes and high forehead creased in fierce concentration as he fought the wheel.

Crushed between the two men, she peered skyward through the small windscreen, trying to see the stars above, trying to keep her bearings in the slewing vehicle.

The jeep bucked and splashed into a puddled streambed. The men's heads crashed against the vehicle's roof and the commander cursed the driver. The motor engaged a lower growling gear, with tyres straddling and slipping over sloping rocks, the vehicle scrambled out of the dark waddi.

Ahead, set against a rise, a settlement materialised out of the night. It took the girl a few seconds to realise that the buildings were derelict. The oasis, it seemed, was populated only by a copse of waving palm trees. The driver drew up at the outskirts of the huddled buildings and switched the headlights off. Darkness closed in. The men alighted from the vehicle. From the rear footwell, they lifted two large rifles. Swinging the slings onto their shoulders, they balanced the guns, curved magazine in the crook of their arms.

'Get down,' the commander barked at the girl. She hesitated, looking into his angry eyes, and jumped wordlessly. 'Move.' The tone was neutral, the barrel of the gun in her back pointed in the direction. The group entered the cluster of earth buildings, a dank wet smell emanated from the hive shapes. 'Stop.'

The men stopped. The girl looked at them, eyes searching from face to face.

'Take your clothes off.'

She backed away and the group closed in on her.

'No.' She faltered. Then again, more firmly, 'No.' She looked beyond the men, searching for some escape, somewhere to run. The commander stepped towards her.

'Off, clothes off!' His voice grated, and he jabbed at her with the butt of his gun.

Slowly she pulled her arms down into the sleeves of her jersey. She looked up, at the men, but her eyes dropped swiftly under the weight of their intent gaze. She lifted the garment over her head. It fell

at her feet, but the men's eyes did not drop with it.

She attempted to step out of her bell-bottom jeans, tugging the heavy fabric over her tennis shoes, tripping on the bundled jersey. She stood in her underwear, arms crossed to cover her bra, her panties, white in the darkness.

The man grunted and gestured, a vertical flick of the gun—up, down—for her to continue. The girl fumbled with her bra, her hands struggling to comply and at the same time shield her body from the unswerving stares of the men. Her face was pale, she exhaled deeply and squared her shoulders to crush down the dread building inside.

'Move!'

The gun in her unprotected back jabbed her up the slope towards a rectangular whitewashed hut, tattered palm frond roof. The shadowed doorway was low. The muzzle pushed her towards the opening, thrusting at her hesitation. She bent and half crawled through. Trying to stand up in the unseeable interior, the ground gave way under her searching feet. She overbalanced, pitching forward, down uneven descending steps. With a shocked splash, she plunged into a pitch-black pool.

The odour of the stagnant water was overwhelming, she whimpered in revulsion.

'Down, get down.' The dark shape of the man's head was silhouetted against the grey of the doorway. He ducked in, glinting shoulders dipping, and moved towards her. The girl stepped deeper into the pool, recoiling with a sharp intake at tickling movements scuttling across her bare skin. She stood, face upturned to the man, shivering, teeth chattering. The water level reached just below her breasts, she wrapped her arms over them and clasped her legs tightly together.

Looming over her, the man hawked and spat into her face. He waved the gun and said, 'Now you are going to tell the truth.'

Not releasing her arms, she blinked the splatter of sputum from her eyes. 'I don't know what you mean. What truth?' The girl's voice was high, confused, scared. 'Everything I have told you is the truth.'

With a curse, the man kicked the fetid liquid up into her face. She could feel its warm viscosity running down her eyelids, lips, her hair hanging drenched, limp against her cheeks.

'Down! Kneel!' the man shouted. For the first time. The suppressed hate exploded off the walls and water.

'No,' she screamed. 'It's too deep!'

'You are a dirty spy! Admit it now or I will kill you. I will give you to the other men.'

For a moment, the space dimmed as the second man stamped down the steps. He pointed his weapon at the hysterical girl and shouted at her. 'Dhilllo. Basaas wasakh ah. Dhilllo. Runta noo sheeg.'

She sobbed up at him, uncomprehending.

He shouted louder. The weeping fuelling their anger, the men kicked more water into her blurred vision. Kick. Kick. Kick. Now they both shouted at her. *Dhilllo. Basaas wasakh ah. Waan ku dili doonnaa. Whore. Spy. Kill you.* She understood only some of the broken phrases of her own language.

With a final curse, the commander stooped and snatched the girl's arm. He yanked her stumbling behind him up the stairs, his companion shoved her from behind.

They emerged jostling into the moonlit passageway. The men forced her between the squat huts, towards the dark cluster of palms.

Reaching the perimeter of the towering trunks, the commander twisted the girl's arm, turning her towards two mounds of freshly dug earth. He pointed at one of the mounds.

'We kill you like we killed your friend. She is dead here.'

He pointed to the second mound. 'Tell the truth, admit you are a spy, or you will lie here next to her.'

The girl, still covering herself, looked at the gun in his hand, scanned the listening trees, the watching buildings, the dark unseen, for a sign of salvation.

'Move.' He pushed her toward the mounds. 'Stand.' He forced her to stand on the overturned earth. 'Who sent you? What do you come to spy on?'

'I am not a spy. I am no part of your war,' the girl wept her denial.

'I know all about you, you and your friends on the boat. I know about you in Seychelles. My spies, they told me about you.' He struck her. 'Bitch, you tell me the truth. Tell me who sent you people here to spy on my country.'

He struck her again, and again, blows and obscenities falling harder, faster, his control shattering. The girl fell to her knees. He kicked at her, spat at her again, till finally, spent, he dragged her to her feet. Muttering to his subordinate, he shoved her down the slope ahead of him. She could barely walk.

The commander flashed on a torch. The beam led them, crisscrossing over a large concrete slab, coming to rest on a black

square in the centre.

'Get down.' He pushed the girl towards the hole. She dodged, breaking free of his grasp. But the second man, standing at her elbow, caught her and slapped her, once, a sharp ringing blow, across the face. He flung her on the ground next to the dark opening.

'No,' she sobbed. 'No. Please. No.' Grim-faced, the men pushed her towards the void with their heavy boots, stepping to drive and direct her with tips of their toecaps. Weeping soundlessly, blinded in the beam, the girl scabbled on her knees on the concrete. Haltingly she uncovered her breasts, gripped the concrete rim, and lowered herself through the gap. The torch followed her, playing over her body hanging above the blackness.

She gasped as liquid swallowed her feet. Arms quaking, she sank down, down. The water reaching up over her thighs, over her stomach, over her breasts, her shoulders sinking beneath the surface. Her cry drowned, then her toes scraped the bottom of the pit. She struggled to the surface and threw her head back desperately, her extended chin barely clearing the water. She lost her precarious toehold. Her head went under and she came up coughing and sobbing.

The water was warm and putrid, alive with small pulses.

'Tell us the truth! You are South African spies. You are spying for the Americans. Tell us now.' The torch interrogated her in its glare. The litany continued. She could see only the barrel of a gun illuminated inches from her head. A black boot menaced into the beam, and stepped down onto her upturned face, pushing her under the surface in a struggling froth of pleading.

The pressure lifted.

She spluttered up, lungs burning for air. Overhead, the men were arguing. Concentrating no longer on her, they were locked in an intense exchange. In the deflected torchlight, the girl made out the commander pushing the second man away from the hole above her. The commander lent down and seized a fist of her sodden hair.

'Out,' he spat. She reached weakly for the rim. He stepped back. 'Hel iyada,' he ordered. The young driver stepped into the light. He knelt and, reaching down, took the girl's extended arm. With a powerful jerk, he heaved her onto the concrete slab. Her left thigh and hip scraped on the jagged lip; long red wheals snaked across her white flesh. She curled into a ball, her naked chest heaving.

The men hauled her to her feet. She reeled between them, her limbs loose with exhaustion and terror.

The Careless Sky

They thrust her towards a rusted corrugated iron shelter, wide cracked concrete stairs ascending into the inscrutable interior. The commander threw the girl onto the steps.

The three moved a short distance away and resumed their hissed argument.

The girl looked up into the sky—the stars were very clear. Orion, the Hunter, with his bow trained on the Seven daughters of Titan and Pleione.

The men had stopped talking. They looked at her, faces set with the weight of their decision. The girl stared up at them in the moment of dead stillness. In flanked formation, they moved towards her.

The piercing scream reverberated between the abandoned buildings and the silent sky.

Annie Lin



Annie Lin is a writer from Taiwan. Despite writing fiction and non-fiction since she can remember, Annie only started to write seriously after she graduated from medical school. A firm believer of a story behind every person, land, and culture, her historical fantasies and sci-fi pieces usually feature a colonial or post-colonial setting. Her first official publications in the anthology *Literature without Boundaries* (2014) (published in Mandarin) includes three short historical fictions based on classical literature.

Annie is currently working on her first novel, *Flipped*. Set in the 1970s Taipei, the story pivots around Meng, a young university student with new-found, reality-twisting powers given by the mysterious entity Fei, and his passion for literature under martial law. *Flipped* is a coming-of-age story about survival under governmental oppression, about love without names, and superpowers.

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Flipped

Meng was sitting at a study desk in the university library when a brown paper bag was slipped between his stack of books. The weather in Taipei had just gotten chilly, and most students were outdoors enjoying the short few days of Autumn. In the empty library, it wasn't hard for Meng to catch Te-Yeh's jacket disappearing behind one of the bookshelves.

As he opened the bag, he wondered why his friend was being sneaky. Inside were two books, wrapped in last week's newspaper. The 1970 printed on the corner had lost its first number when someone, presumably Te-Yeh, used the thin inked paper to conceal the cover of the books.

Meng caught his breath when he removed the wrapping and saw the titles. He grabbed his bag and shoved the books inside, then strode into the astronomy aisle.

Te-Yeh was there, nose buried in a hardback book Meng would bet fifty dollars he understood nothing of. He turned his back towards him when he approached.

'What the fuck,' Meng whispered as he followed suit, taking a random book off the shelf. They stood back-to-back, like two strangers who had both happened to visit the university library in the dusty evening light.

Above Meng and Te-Yeh, Fei flashed a smirk before sinking into the space between the two heavy books on the top shelf. Meng tried his best not to react to them hovering above his head watching everything he did.

He still was not used to being the only person who could see a spirit like Fei. He had read his fair share of fantasy novels, but until two weeks ago, he never imagined himself being subjected to anything supernatural. Fei had appeared when he picked up the coin they had

bound their presence to, and offered him a deal: for him to wield their power.

Of course, I can flip through possibilities myself. Much like what you can do now with the coin. I imagine this much more interesting, though. There's no fun in seeing how things play out when I'm the one holding the script, Fei had told him.

With their power, Meng could use a simple coin to decide which reality he chose to stay in. The way one would use a head or tails to pick what to do.

'What the fuck?' he said again, as Te-Yeh inched within hearing range.

'That's Tagore, your favourite poet.' Te-Yeh helpfully pointed out.

'I know that,' he said and blindly elbowed somewhere behind him. The muffled 'ouch' he got in response was satisfactory. 'How did you get two of them?'

'Hey, no need for the grand gesture. A simple thank you would do.' Te-Yeh joked. 'You told me I wasn't selling the book club thing well, so I got you samples.'

I don't see what's so special about these books. Fei's voice, speaking directly in his thoughts as always, rang through Meng's head as they ducked forward and stuck their head through the fabric of his bag. *The contents are the same, just written differently.*

He ignored them.

'One of these, I could've borrowed from this library.'

'You can't be a proper salesman without putting shock value into consideration,' Te-Yeh whispered smugly, 'Besides, you know what matters is the other one. It's impossible to get that anywhere, legally.'

Fei chimed in. *Wrong. There is no such thing as impossible with your power.*

Meng simply nodded. 'I'll think about it,' he said. They all knew he would be heading to this mysterious book club with a wish list in hand next session.

Te-Yeh insisted Meng wait at least five minutes before heading out of the library after him. The moment he was out of sight, Meng stepped down the stairs two at a time, leaving the school library and his evening plans behind.

Watch your steps, Fei remarked suddenly.

He could feel them grinning in his head, showing off their canines

just a heartbeat before something wet splattered on his head; right as a familiar presence walked into his vision. In a panic, he reached up to wipe away the bird droppings in his hair with bare hands and succeeded in making everything worse.

Yu-Ling halted midway towards the library entrance; her attention blatantly focused on the white warm ooze on his head as she backtracked. Stopping in front of him, she looked him over before raising an eyebrow. Her messy braid and untucked shirttail screamed back-to-back classes from eight to five and a late night in labs.

'I swear to God, you are the unluckiest person I've ever seen,' she said as she dug a hand into her backpack and pulled out a small pack of tissues.

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' he said as he pressed tissue sheets into his hair. This was getting much more embarrassing than it should be. It didn't help that last week, she'd rejected his declaration of love.

Fei floated around Yu-Ling before reaching out to caress her cheek, the tip of their claw-like fingers dripping like candle wax. You know, you can just flip back. Less bird poop on your head just might be the thing you need, their voice echoed in his head. He knew they were just taunting him. Fei couldn't interact with any physical beings and attempting to swat them away from Yu-Ling would only make him seem more like an idiot.

They did have a point, though.

'Well, if you're done with that, I'll be heading off now,' Yu-Ling said as she put the pack away. Her body half-turned, prepared to leave.

'Um, wait. Wait,' Meng stuttered, almost dropping Fei's silver coin as he flipped it. Yu-Ling looked back, eyes questioning and opened her mouth—

Watch your steps, Fei remarked suddenly.

Meng could feel their canines as they grinned in his head. He turned his head just in time to catch Yu-Ling walking up the stairs towards the library.

'Hey,' he waved and saw her stop mid-step, which he counted as a win. 'How's class? You're here later than usual.'

Yu-Ling looked down to check her watch before rolling her eyes. 'I'm not. You're just leaving early. Now, if you'll excuse me, some of us have more schoolwork than usual this time of the year,' she flung her

bag over her shoulder and walked past him.

That was bad, Fei commented as they watch her figure disappear into the building. *To think that you need bird droppings to have semi-successful small talk with someone you've known half your life.*

I think I won't mind an extra shower, Meng thought, as he flipped the coin again.

The mysterious book club Te-Yeh had invited him to was a secret, yes, but all types of gatherings were technically underground. They read everything they could get their hands on in an old storage room in the school gym, using mats as cushions and vaulting boxes as tables.

'You have to bring your own notebook if you want to copy the pages,' Po-Mu, one of Meng's upperclassman in the club said. 'We are sharing these precious books with several other groups of people.'

'He means his fiancée Min-Chi and her students,' Te-Yeh whispered loudly, earning himself a slap with a rolled-up newspaper.

Meng wondered if Yu-Ling would be interested in literature. She wasn't as big of a bookworm as him. In fact, he was pretty sure if he placed a sci-fi book and some physics papers in front of her, she'd pick the latter to pass the time. Why she listened to any of his book rants could be one of the seven greatest mysteries of Taipei.

Probably because she pities you, Fei said.

He wondered about this out loud, three weeks after joining the club, when he and the others got some beers and sprawled themselves in the middle of the school's sports field after sunset.

'Sìau-liân, you need to let go. "She's not the only woman out there,"' Te-Yeh said and smacked his shoulder, no longer talking in Mandarin.

'Shut uuup,' Meng complained as he pushed Te-Yeh aside, 'I'm so going to tell the teacher you just said that.'

'Woah, scary. I'd have shat my pants if I were ten years younger.'

'Fuck you.'

'See, it's fine when you swear but I should wear the sign of shame around my neck and get fined for not using the National language.'

Meng quietened on that. It was not the fault of any one of them, nor that of their parents, that schools prohibited their mother tongue. It was simply part of the martial law: to make this country better, they should not keep speaking any uncultured languages or share dangerous thoughts. Such was also the reason why some books were no longer

able to be seen under sunlight.

Next to him, Fei floated in the night air, reflecting the moonlight while dripping down like quicksilver. They did not say anything, but Meng could imagine them being disappointed if he ever told them that he had no idea how to change the circumstance.

Behind them, Po-Mu stood up from the grass, schoolbag slung over his shoulder. 'I'm returning this one to the store,' he announced.

'I'll go with you, if that's okay,' Meng said. He always wondered about where they got the books.

Po-Mu stayed silent for a moment, then shrugged and gestured Meng to stand up. The rest of the group booed at their leaving. Meng flipped them off without a backward glance.

The bookstore itself was underwhelming. Meng expected to see something extraordinary—after all, this was the place they collected books that couldn't be found anywhere else. Instead, the interior was tight with rows of textbooks from floor to ceiling, none of them interesting enough for him to pick up.

'Our next batch of books will be Jin Yong,' Po-Mu said, rubbing his hands together, 'these will be the first ones we read on the list that aren't translations. The oo-jí-sáng told me last month that he got a friend in Hong Kong who's got an entire bookshelf of wuxia and still thinks *The Legend of the Condor Heroes* is the best. I've only ever heard rumours about the plot, can't believe we're lucky enough to get our hands on it...'

They both nearly jumped when the owner's voice boomed from the back.

'I can't give you Jin Yong this week. He is too popular and the one I've got in the back is for another group.'

Po-Mu's face fell. 'You sure about that?'

'Hey, I don't make the rules,' the man held up his hands in false surrender. 'How about you kids go read Shakespeare or something for once?'

'You said that last month, and we did.'

'I meant legal books,' the man rolled his eyes and started shooing them away with a feather duster. 'Come back next week and I'll see what I can do.'

Po-Mu held his posture but there was disappointment in his eyes. He said thank you before stepping out the door.

An, that sucked. If only someone could change the shop owner's mind. Circling around them like a vulture, Fei pretended to sob. Too bad I am stuck with a coward. The previous user of this power always had an idea of what to change, and how to change them, so as to make everyone satisfied.

I don't even know how to make this work, Meng thought as he fumbled for the coin.

It always works if you set the correct independent variables. Keep an eye on what's changeable and the world is your oyster.

Meng wondered where they learnt all those technical terms. He had only ever heard of these when Yu-Ling was talking about her research, and he could barely remember whether the control variable was a name for something the experimenter controls or not.

Fuck it, he thought and flipped the coin.

'The Legend of the Condor Heroes is the best. I've only ever heard rumours about the plot...' Po-Mu was saying when a faint ringing noise came from the back of the store. A minute later, the owner appeared from the back, a newspaper package in hand.

'You're in luck, kids. I was going to tell you to come back next week, but someone cancelled,' he pushed the books across the counter, which a grinning Po-Mu took.

'I still can't believe how lucky we are,' Po-Mu said under his breath when they stepped into the alley, 'the guy has connections, but there are only a few books each time. Yet here I am, with the most popular banned book in my bag after having the chance slip by for a month...'

'Hey, don't forget to share. You're not allowed to keep it forever.'

'I know, I know. My tiny dorm room doesn't support my book hoarding habit, either.' He waved him off, then jokingly added: 'Hey, if you're secretly working for the government, remember to tell them I've got nothing.'

Remembering his joke earlier about snitching, Meng's ears turned red.

'Really, Min-Chi had a neighbour who was arrested for—hear me out—reading Marxism. It's been a year and she never heard of him again. Rumour said his classmate got an award for selling him out.'

'Good thing we're not reading anything like that,' Meng said and got a nod in return. They headed together back to the school grounds before parting.

Meng felt fantastic about what had happened. Previously, whenever he borrowed Fei's power, it was always about probabilities: winning a coin toss; getting better combinations in mahjong; having bird droppings land one step away from him; giving himself a series of green lights on the road. He could have the odds in his favour, yet he never considered the possibility of using it to change someone's action.

You are not the cleverest, but I see potential in you, Fei told him before he fell asleep that night. On their metallic skin with light flowing under like a fortune crystal, he could see a smile with too-sharp teeth.

In retrospect, they should have predicted something like this would happen. When the police busted through the door, shouting 'nobody move', the only thought Meng had was 'no wonder the other group cancelled their reading.'

'You need a warrant,' Po-Mu stood up from his mat, a forced steadiness in his voice while the others scrambled to cover up their reading materials with textbooks. His tall frame covered the leading cop's vision. Te-Yeh intentionally knocked over a basket of baseballs. Meng shoved the books into an old torn Homeplate pillowcase and threw it into the dusty pile of mats.

The policeman shoved Po-Mu aside and entered the room, mindful of all the rolling balls. 'This is our warrant,' he said, patting his gun holster.

Meng was reaching for the coin when his knees buckled under a forceful kick in the shin.

I almost feel bad for you, Fei told him under the blinding lamp, *but you know what, this is getting quite boring. I just might leave you for someone else if it doesn't work out. The coin is just a medium, I can strip away its power anytime. Don't you have any type of escape plan?*

'I don't know,' Meng said and received a slap in the face. His fingers were shaking from exhaustion, and he couldn't remember the last time he was this close to passing out. The police officer sitting across from him adjusted the lamp, so it was shining directly into his eyes.

I can't believe how useless you are, Fei said. They passed through the person interrogating him. It was like they couldn't hold their shape together due to frustration.

I'm so, so tired, he thought. He would have cried by now if he wasn't

already dehydrated. If only he could get his hands on the coin. Then he could flip back to the last time he used it. In the bookstore. He could make sure the club did not get the books. Everything will turn back to normal.

Except, there was always the possibility of this happening again, as long as the book club kept running. He wouldn't be able to erase all the horrific outcomes. Hell, he couldn't even fix what's happening *now*. Not with all his belongings taken away by the police.

There's nothing I can do, he thought to himself.

Fei threw their hands into the air and left.

Haley Lawson



Haley Lawson is an American writer and teacher. She has taught in the U.S.A., Mongolia, and South Korea. Living and working abroad gave Haley a new perspective on her mother tongue. What started as grammar lesson plans grew into her first novel.

A lover of all things make-believe and magick, Haley writes genre fiction. Having finished two fantasy novels, she is working on her third entitled *Typhoon* and is querying her novel *Mages and Madness*.

Mages and Madness follows Mel, a third-generation mage immigrant living in the United States. Diagnosed with schizophrenia, Mel needs not only strength but sanity to save her sister from another world.

In *Typhoon*, Amelia uses storm currents to jump from Nowhere to Somewhere. Her job as a jumper has her catching everything from Cheerios to cameras, but when she is tasked with a 'release,' things don't go as planned.

Haley writes under the pen name H.M.L. Swann.

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Typhoon

A typhoon was coming.

Amelia could feel it in the air. The wind twisted the trees and sent chimeras flailing into the skyscrapers. Through the café's open door, their hideous screeching mixed with the faint sounds of crumbling concrete.

Magda rode a powder blue moped made from recycled parts. She parked it in the middle of the road; vortices of brown leaves and debris swirled around her feet. Magda's thick plastic heels had toy dinosaurs immobilized in the synthetic material, like fossils frozen in amber.

'Typhoon's coming,' she said, sitting across from Amelia. 'I've got a jump for you.' Magda pulled a contract out of her pleather bag and slid it across the table. Catching the barista's eye, she pointed at Amelia's cup to signify her order.

Despite the wind whistling past the door, the café's customers were stagnant and still. Water sputtered through the espresso machine's corroded valves as the barista poured and delivered another weak shot to their table. Amelia sipped her own americano. Vapor fogged her goggles and she repositioned them on top of her leather aviator's helmet. The coffee was bitter, gritty, and tasted of sawdust. Then again, it wasn't truly coffee. It couldn't be, but Amelia didn't care to know what she was *actually* drinking. Nowhere was the place everything unwanted ended up: plastic, hardware, technology, old keys, lost loved ones, and the mythical creatures no one believed in anymore.

'So,' Magda said, pulling a flask from her neon plastic trench, 'will you be taking the job then?' Potent liquid gurgled into her coffee. Amelia watched this in the mirror reflection of Magda's heart-shaped glasses, teal in color.

Amelia took the contract, relishing the feel. It was *real* paper, smooth and dry, not damp and made out of mulched trash.

'When's the jump?'

'Less than an hour.'

'The catch?' Amelia said, placing a finger between the sealed pages. The scar on her left forearm was visible even in the low light of the café. A thick carved 'A,' its size and gruesome amount of scar tissue made it hard not to notice.

'It's not a catch. It's a release. It's already in your Cessna.' Magda nodded her shaved head towards the window.

The café sat in the shadow of the airport. Dirigibles and zeppelins fought against the wind current, moving like migrating whales. Amelia could see her Cessna 150 parked on the runway through the window. It was her baby, jacked-up with a turboprop engine she had fitted in herself.

Amelia used storm currents to jump from Nowhere to Somewhere. Being a jumper was lucrative business; the residents of Nowhere would do anything to feel like they were home again. They paid outrageously for the taste of Cheerios, threw away point-coins for working cameras, and gave their souls for mirrors that weren't cracked. She had gone and caught everything there was to catch and never missed a jump back.

But what was a release?

Amelia tugged against the wax seal and a photo fell onto the table.

Magda's hand shot out like she was playing slapjack, hitting the table with her palm. Coffee rocked and sloshed, dripping over the lips of their mugs.

'Careful,' Magda said, flipping the photo face-side down.

Amelia scanned the contract. It was a release—a jumper was being hired to take someone *from* Nowhere and bring them to Somewhere. The payment was five-hundred point-coins and a years' worth of fuel. It was the biggest payment Amelia had ever seen. With it, she could stop storm hunting, she could take a break from jumping... for a little while anyway.

'Don't you know what this means?' Magda interrupted her thoughts. 'You'll have no need to come back once you're out.' She was leaning in, booze heavy on her breath. Magda had been scheming about leaving Nowhere ever since Amelia had met her, but this was the first plan that seemed plausible.

Amelia hesitated. She could feel a seed of hope being planted in her chest. She couldn't water it. Not yet. She'd been let down before.

'Who?'

Magda lifted her hand off the table. Amelia took the photo. She

held it close to her chest, hiding it like a hand of cards. Chancing a glance, she peeped at the picture.

A man. Short. No more than 5'5. He was stocky in build with a clean-shaven face.

'There are two photos.'

Tilting her head to one side, Amelia peeled at the corner of the worn photograph. She thought it had been printed on thick paper, but it peeled away, revealing another image.

It was the same man, she could tell from his stance and build, but this time, he was bruised, on a leash, and hooded, the leather mask concealing his face. He had a matching scar on his left forearm. An 'A.'

Like a burst dam, dark memories came flooding in. Her mind was filled with cool, black water—dangerous and suffocating. Amelia's breath caught in her chest. The leather harness she wore felt too tight, constricting her belly. She fidgeted with the brass buckles.

Had A set up the release? Was he trying to take her back? Amelia shook her head, a vain attempt to beat the memories away. Still, she remembered all too well how she had ended up in Nowhere. Amelia didn't realize others were arriving in the same brutal way.

'I thought he went out of business.'

Magda was applying purple lipstick, smacking her lips together. 'Guess not.'

Amelia's mouth tasted bitter and she stole a sip of Magda's drink to wash it out. She coughed as the liquor burned her throat.

'Say I take the jump,' Amelia said. 'Say I get to Somewhere and actually free him, as he deserves. Then what?'

'You stay there. I'll come find you.'

'It's not that easy.'

'Why not?' Magda handed over her purple lipstick.

Amelia scoffed, taking the plastic tube. She eyed the tacky cosmetic, ground-up fish scales giving it a glittery hue. 'Really, Magda?'

'I chase up work, not ink. You know how hard that is to find. Still, one mustn't let formalities slide. Signature please.'

Something bloomed inside Amelia's chest. Whether it was her musings of escape or the shot of booze, she couldn't tell, but the little cylinder of lipstick felt heavy in her hand. Amelia signed her name as tight as she could write with the chalky make-up.

'Lovely.' Magda snatched up the contract, tucking it inside her bag. Amelia slipped the two photos in her breast pocket and followed her out the door.

The wind hit them first. Rain and air had fused into one force, smacking Amelia in the face. She tugged her goggles down over her eyes. Magda straddled her moped, shouting, *'See you in Somewhere!'* but Amelia could barely make it out.

'How?' she shouted back, feeling her own voice get swallowed up by the storm.

Magda never answered. She was already scooting away, leaving a trail of black fumes in her wake. Chimeras shrieked in the distance and the world felt like it was collapsing in around her.

Out of the languid café and away from the stupor of its customers, Amelia focused on the task at hand. The growing typhoon sent adrenaline through her legs. She ran to the runway and hopped into the familiar two-seater plane. The cargo was there, right where Magda had left it.

He was shirtless, dressed only in black jeans with a hood covering his head. Amelia remembered how dark the world was inside those hoods. She remembered the false sense of security they brought, only after fear was beaten out of them.

Stitched together with patchwork leather, it was designed like a falconry hood. Apart from a small hole at the mouth, the nose and eyes were covered. Amelia reached out to him, placing a palm on either side of his head, preparing to unveil the man.

He lashed out, slapping her hands away from him. *'Leave the hood on.'* His voice was gravel, harsh, like the early morning.

Twice as wide as her, and probably twice as heavy, his arms were coated in dark hair. A map of thick pink scars crisscrossed his short torso. Amelia reflexively touched her own stomach, feeling her harness that acted as her protection, her armor. She breathed in deep, taking pleasure in its tight restraint.

'Don't worry. You're safe now. Don't you want to see?'

He shook his head and leaned away from her; every muscle remained tense. Amelia consoled herself that it would take him time to trust again—it had for her.

She powered up the plane. The propeller fought against the wind before gaining enough momentum to whirl into a blur. They crept down the runway, picking up speed, moving into a direct headwind. As she pulled the yoke towards herself, the Cessna shuddered into the air.

Once airborne, the wind lashed against the plane, pushing them side to side, dropping and then lifting them again. Amelia would have to make the jump quick or risk crashing.

Making the jump was like swimming into a whirlpool. Amelia couldn't directly enter the typhoon. She had to follow its current, getting closer and closer until the heart of the storm consumed and shot them out into Somewhere, like a slingshot being let loose.

'Where?'

Amelia looked at the man. He was gripping his seat, his body was shaking, the hair on his arms was raised.

'You're being released.' She had found the current and was guiding the plane into it. This was the terrifying moment when she could lose control. The moment where the storm felt like a death trap of wind and rain. Each time she started a jump, terror blossomed in her heart, but then something magical happened—the current took her up. She synced with the typhoon.

They were going to make it.

It was addictive really, an intoxicating rush of power and risk. What made it even sweeter this time, was that it was her *last* jump. She was finally getting out.

'Released?' He jarred Amelia out of her reverie.

'Someone's paid to take you back. You'll be an un-lost now. We'll both be—'

'No!' His hooded face was shaking violently.

Something akin to sympathy made her look at him. Of course he didn't want to go. She knew how conditioned he was. Stockholm syndrome was something she had known too well—the tangy smell of A's sweat, the timbre of his voice through the hood, his beatings and caresses, it had all once been too comfortable.

'Look, I didn't pick this for you. I'm just a jumper and right now we've got to get out of here!'

'No, no, no! It's not safe. The people. They're not safe! NO!' He was rocking back and forth. His hands were feeling blindly for the door.

'Don't open that!' Amelia shouted. Her hands were still on the yoke, eyes on him. 'Don't you understand, we're in the middle of a typhoon—'

That was when it hit.

Part-lion, part-goat, part-fire-breathing-dragon, a three-headed chimera slammed into the passenger side. Air whistled in through a fresh split in the door frame as the beast rebounded. A bleating cry from the goat head preceded the lion's earsplitting roar. Amelia nearly let go of the controls to cover her ears, but the three serpentine necks wavered too close, seemingly without control against the gale. The chimera was

trying to steady itself, beating leathery wings in a fierce attempt to keep its lion body airborne. In the seething tempest, Amelia's Cessna rattled and shook. Logic told her she needed to get out of danger, but Amelia was so close to the jump, she couldn't abandon it now—not when she was about to escape for herself.

The dragon head swung towards them, bellowing out a mouth full of fire. Orange flames licked the plane. Amelia could feel the heat through the Cessna's metal frame. To avoid further damage, she rammed the yoke to the left, banking the plane. The attitude indicator registered a sixty-degree bank as a wing shot up. Amelia pushed her baby to its limits and rolled the plane over. Once, twice, Nowhere spun out beneath them as the plane cartwheeled. Amelia righted the plane when the fire ceased, but the chimera was still there. Its girth made it impossible to avoid and it knocked the Cessna 150 out of the center of the typhoon.

The jump was lost.

Torrential rain and typhoon winds sent them skirting across the sky. Amelia's stomach plummeted with every drop. Her attention was consumed with recovering control to avoid crashing. She needed to get back to the center, but caught in a direct crosswind, she was flying into the wind and barely moving.

This had been her chance to jump. This had been her ticket out. She could hear A laughing in her mind. Amelia was cursing the chimera when air from the storm churned inside the cockpit.

The cargo had opened the door—slammed his body against the crack and forced it open. The door was ripped off with a gust of wind and fell away, disappearing in the clouds.

'Stop!' she yelled but it was too late. He was falling through the air, plummeting towards Nowhere.

He had jumped without her.

Back on the ground, Amelia surveyed the damage done to her plane. A trip to the junkyard and a few hours of work would put her Frankenstein craft back in working order. She looked up at the sky.

A blimp was spinning out in the last life of the typhoon. With just enough pull left in the storm, it made the jump. She watched it disappear, like a shooting star, and wondered if Magda was there.

Leaning against her Cessna, Amelia adjusted her goggles and took

the photos out of her breast pocket. She whistled through her teeth and traced the scar on his arm. If she couldn't get the cargo to Somewhere, she could at least give him a name.

'Adam,' she whispered.

Amelia kissed the photo of Adam, clean-shaven and healthy, and put it in her pocket. Then, taking Adam's trader photo, she folded it into a rudimentary paper airplane, hiding his hooded face and scarred body.

Lifting her arm behind her head, she released the origami photo free.

Charlotte Pacey



Hailing from Leeds and now based in Manchester, Charlotte Pacey is—or strives to be—a poet and fiction writer. Her writing tends to obsess over themes of emotional experience, relationships and place (among others), and how these aspects contribute to the way we understand our mosaic selves, and each other. Some might call it Literary Realism!

Charlotte is interested in fusing the written word with alternative art forms such as audio/music, photography and videography. Her work has featured in several multimedia pieces, including a collaborative project with MIF and Salford-based gallery, Paradise Works, and an Arts Council-funded venture, blending poetry with ambient soundscapes.

Her selection of works in this anthology traverse the boundaries of form and technique, from dialect poetry to extended metaphor. Each piece experiments with imagery, language and sounds to illuminate moments and memories of the human condition.

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Downt Road

Days were longer, back then.
Even wi nowt to do but loiter
ont estate. Dirt tanned n blue tongued
from Mr Freeze pops. Front gardens trespassed
t'get ball for Kerby. There's always one
cack-handed thrower. Treks downt ginnel
in nesh weather, t'back fields where tyre swings
int woods. Dewy grass soakin hems of yer kegs:
Mum'll get a right monk on.

Trudgin from school. *Ya laiking out later?*
shouts yer mate over road. In a postered bedroom,
you faff around wi eyeliner, concealer lips,
brush lugs out yer hair, all to traipse
round Mozzas and ogle fitty ont tills. Boys
on bikes stare at y'mates arse in denim shorts.
You cackle about it int park, chelpin away
blastin Arctic Monkeys from a Sony Ericsson. Pray
chuddy masks the cig on yer breath.

Flummoxed feelings. Car brimmin
wi bags ont drive down. Nerves janglin.
Mum starts beefin when it's time to say tarra
and dad kisses yer ed, *look after thissen.*
Mek a brew n gander round yer room:
you'll mek a right nest o this. Meetin strangers
int quad, tell one where yer from:
You're from Yorkshire? Oh.
I thought that was just wilderness.

Spirals in San Francisco

the sun felt different over there
scintillating
every building drenched in gold
streets as steep as the stories they held
Lombard bijouised with flower beds
and chowder in a bread bowl
down at the wharf
my eyes snagged on crumbling murals
above painted hearts on pavements

how come you've got a face like a slapped arse, then?
under a straw hat, dad blazed red
my brother and I detached
from parental guidance adrift
in the city for a while, my lips and lungs
quaking as we watched boats shudder
in the harbour
numb next to lapping water
and lifeless sea lions

passing the bleached spines of palms
I picked scattered ones from the ground
careless to prick fingertips
 there was still so much more—
 never again would I know—

air seemed to compress
boulevards teeming tourists
sporting I <3 SF teens
and mid-melt ice creams
a couple were kissing outside Ghirardelli's
he wore clubmaster lenses over closed eyes like—

gulping in a plastic bag
sweat laminated my body
limbs fizzy, like television static
while a sunburnt bulldog squinted
from a doorway

the spluttering engine
caught between starting up
& shutting down buoyed
only by my brother's tender hold
this is the worst it will feel, y'know
and staggering to the shade
of trees at Coit Tower
collecting breaths like quarters
off the sidewalk
minutes snapping with the sound
of camera shutters
we trampled over those floored hearts
back to air-conned refuge

The Art of Permeation

a shoal of bodies
drift beneath lights fractured
ten-fold by the mist, colour rippling
like petrol in a puddle,
blue fusing with toxic green
on the current as
your antennae
traverse aphodisia
through this net of souls
flagella frisk torsos and
faces who writhe
in tonight's pusling melodies
until
their gaze moors to yours
two alien vessels approaching
through neon darkness, swept
by one another's tide
and soon
comes
contact
fingerprints of glowing
algae on skin, trailing
bioluminescence
at your neck
throbbing jaw
the beach of your midriff
a knowing swells in their smile
dyadic scents latch as
pheromones surround and plume
in mucous webs
waiting

to copulate
anticipation foams in your belly
like a wave rising
to crest
a pair of clams opening
unveiling the red pearl
berthed inside
what follows is a nuclear fusion
of muscle
succumb
taste lust on their tongue
and marvel
how many times this is happening
right now
in the blindness
a quivering brews deep below
warm holes dilate
as blood floods and
saliva bubbles
between
the shores of lips
popping against pink
barnacles
jaws plunge onto
flesh
passions glug
and spurt within, like
a geyser, and desire pours
into them and into you
like whale song

their teeth
 nipping through soft mouth
 hands grip throats and
 tongues discover ears
where silhouettes engorge
 one another, a coalesced body
 gyrating
 amongst the reef of heads
bass pools with heartbeats
 while cravings breed
 and minutes lose
 all meaning
 until
 the tsunami
 subsides
 spindrift calms to coastal fizz
tentacles retract
 inside conch skulls
 and like a drawn-out tide
distance forms between you
 one multiplies to two
 another tryst abandoned
 to the night

Debbie Enever



Debbie Enever is a Northern nomad currently living in Glossop. *Middowed* is her memoir.

'Middowed' is a coined term to describe a mother whose only child has died.

The memoir is presented as a dual narrative. One strand is told in the present tense and takes the reader on Debbie's twelve-month journey in the immediate aftermath of her son's sudden death in a road traffic accident. The second strand delivers a biographical account of Dan's life, from birth to his death aged fifteen. The narrative explores themes of grief, of single-parenting, friendships, and family life, and at its heart celebrates the joy of a mother-son relationship.

This extract is the end of chapter 7 and start of chapter 8 and begins with Debbie's timeline. Dan is in the hospital, has been declared dead, his organs donated. Debbie's close friend, Dan's Auntie Liz, is with them.

middowed.com

🐦 / 📷 @debbiee69

Middowed

Chapter 7 cont: Monday 28th May 2018

‘He’s ready.’

My chest tightens. The nurse holds open the door.

Liz and I enter the now familiar room. Beige walls, blinds drawn, a solitary blue plastic chair. It is calmer now. The machinery has gone. There are no whirrs or beeps.

‘Hello Dan,’ I say, my voice catching with surprise. The tubes and head brace have gone too. He looks like Dan, asleep. He’s been washed clean and is cooler to my touch. His eyes, now, are not sticky or dull, but closed, his brown lashes resting softly. His hair is tousled, as usual, exactly as it should be, and free of matted blood. He’s in his newest Manchester United top, his black skinny jeans. I kiss his smooth cheek. To my lips his skin feels normal, alive.

In this false slumber it is as if he has been released, and I feel a surge of hope, almost expecting him to sit up and say *flippin’ heck, what was that all about eh?* and then we’d laugh and hug. But he doesn’t.

‘We had a right time getting those jeans on.’ The blonde nurse smiles.

‘I’m sure.’ I return the smile. I’m clean too. While four surgical teams worked to remove Dan’s organs, I broke the horrendous news to my parents, slept, showered and now I am here beside him in a different jumper and jeans. Liz has showered too. Her husband Gary has brought her freshly pressed clothes. They look somehow artificial in contrast with her tear-crumpled face. I cannot yet look at my face. I don’t want to see what my pain looks like.

‘We’ve been to see Nanny and Grandad, they send their love,’ I say, my attention back on Dan.

'Everyone we've told has said how proud they are of you,' adds Liz, patting his arm.

My thoughts are slippery. I know Dan is not alive, but he is right here in front of me dressed like Dan. His organs have been taken, but he still looks real to me. What else have I got now? I try to commit his face to memory, because soon I will not see it again and I want his image seared onto my mind forever. The wisps of hair at his temples and the nape of his neck. The beautiful shape of his mouth. His nose, big, cartilaginous, in the way that teenage boys' noses are. The curve of his light brown eyebrows. I trace the freckles on his arm, the ones he would use as a dot-to-dot when bored in class. I know that wishing is pointless, but it doesn't stop me wanting just one more chance to tell him off for drawing on his arm.

The nurse hesitates by the bed. 'I know Dan's a bit older than most of the children we see, but would you like to make a memory box?' she asks.

'Ummm,' I pull at my lip and look at Liz. This is when I need my best friend's guidance, because I'm not sure. He's not a baby. Do I need this? I think of the row of infant teeth I've kept Blu-Tacked to the corkboard in the dining room. The teeth Dan tells me are *a bit serial killer*.

'Yes, we do,' Liz says firmly to the nurse. 'You'll be grateful of it another time.'

I am grateful right now that she is here, steering me. We are given a box, all powder blue stripes and gingerbread men.

Oh God Mum, you're joking

There are little bags for keeping locks of hair in, and a cast for hand or footprints. We giggle as we try to fit Dan's gigantic hand onto the cast. More snorts as we roller red paint on his sole to make a footprint on paper. I feel giddy, silly, because this is just ridiculous. Two days ago, Dan and I were chatting about the World Cup. Now I'm manipulating his lifeless body to make crude pictures for posterity.

'I'm making a right pig's ear of this,' I say to Dan, placing the wet prints on the radiator to dry. 'You know I'm rubbish at this kind of thing.'

Yeh, I got my lack of artistic talent from you, Mum

I cut locks of Dan's hair as discreetly as possible. I avoid the hair where the metal staples still hold his skull together. My eyes cannot look at that part of him without my mind shrieking.

We have a box of things now.

I am not sure what to do next. Is now the moment I must leave Dan and not ever come back? The notion pierces me.

The blonde nurse tells us that Dan will be taken to Rose Cottage tomorrow. It's such an incongruous name for the mortuary.

It's like calling Manchester City a 'great team'

It's a Bank Holiday so there's no one there today, which means Dan will stay here, being looked after in his private room on the ward.

I don't know what to do. I can't remember what I should have been doing today or tomorrow. I do know I need to feed the dog, and that I can't do anything else for Dan. Liz tells me that it's time to go home.

'When can I see him again?' I ask the nurse.

Tomorrow, I am assured. I can call Rose Cottage and come in any time.

Liz and I pick up our bags and bits and slowly make our way back down in the lift and through the corridors to meet Gary, who'll drive us home. It's hard to go. Dan'll be on his own. I'm his mum and I'm leaving him there, without anyone he knows.

I check my phone as we reach the ground floor. It's clogged with messages. I close the screen quickly.

I notice the Police Family Liaison Officer in a waiting area by the main entrance and my stomach bounces. What now? I've already told her what I know, she wrote it down. She hurries over.

'I need two minutes with you,' she says, and makes me look quickly through the statement I gave. I can't see properly because the words swim and don't make sense, and I don't want to read them anyway, but I sign where she tells me to. She has nothing new to tell me; Dan was on his own, the van hit him as he crossed the road. That is it.

She looks into my eyes and reminds me that she is here for me, that it's her job to keep me informed about any police investigation, to do what she can to help, and again I feel a tremor of distrust. I ask her to find out school contact details and let the Head know so she can contact Dan's friends, even though it's half term. She promises she'll do it.

'Are you sure that you don't want me to come home with you?' Liz checks for the tenth time. I have already quietly declined other offers from Anna, Sarah, and Eve, friends who are anxious about me.

'I'm just going to cry myself to sleep clutching Dan's clothes,' I say. I simply want to sleep with his warm-caramel-and-Lynx boy scent beside me. Gary and Liz drop me home. Liz looks worn out. I tell her

I tell her I love her, thank her, and wave goodbye.

Maggie bounces from the settee wagging her tail when I step over the threshold and, after a quick wee in the garden, follows me upstairs and plonks on her cushion outside my bedroom door.

I'm too tired even for tears. I crawl into bed holding the scraps of Dan's bloodied t-shirt and fall asleep instantly.

Chapter 8: November 2005– October 2006

Dan's birthday' book, 7th November 2005, three years old:

You snuck into my bed at 2 am. Woke up again at 6 and asked, 'what day is it today? Is it my birthday?' So, we got up, came downstairs and you insisted on watching *Winnie the Pooh* (sickly Disney version). Ate toast for breakfast, with a drink of milk. Opened presents: doctors' set, trains and track, *Bob the Builder* books and video, *Maisy Goes Camping* book, Animal Snap, *Monkey Puzzle* book. Then Nanny picked us up and we took you to nursery, along with a big bag of Milky Ways to share with your friends.

Home after lunch where you watched *Bob the Builder* and *Winnie the Pooh* (again) and played with your toys while I prepared food for your party. At 4 pm-ish all your friends arrived. Auntie Liz came along too, and, of course, your best mate, two-year-old Joe and his mum Anna. You all had a great time eating breadsticks and chocolate and drinking Ribena, playing with your toys, dancing, and running around.

Daddy came round later and brought a wooden road set which you and Joe got stuck into straightaway. Big brother Marcus called round with an Etch-a-Sketch and more chocolate. When everyone had gone, Daddy helped you into your pyjamas and then you sat on his knee and had a couple of stories and a bottle of milk and then fell... fast... asleep.



By the time autumn 2005 rolled around, I was back at work, and the 'forever' house was almost sold. Our we-can-stretch-to-this-because-we-love-each-other-and-will-be-a-happy-family-here home, a fabulous four-bedroomed stone terrace on a leaf lined road, was no longer ours.

And the 'forever' family was no more either. Steve had his own new home nearby, but most definitely apart. He became *fun-weekend-dad*, and I became a single-parent.

Two days before his third birthday, Dan and I moved into our two-up, two-down at 18 Railway Street. Life, that had become thin and frayed, began to patch up. We were only a few streets away from our good friends Anna and Joe. Liz was round the corner. Liz minded Dan when I needed a break, scrubbed him in the bath, and ignored the howls that usually prevented me from washing his hair. She sang silly songs to him and made him laugh and cuddled and kissed him with as fierce a love as she had shown her own children.

We gained new neighbours. On one side, an elderly lady that liked to glare at small boys having fun. On the other Doris and Ted. They were the slightly dotty grandparents for any children on the street, as well being actual grandparents to Alfie and Ollie, who'd turn up often and sometimes played with Dan. Doris and Ted had our spare key. I would regularly lock myself out; they would regularly help me get back in. Dan was fascinated by Doris's extensive garden gnome collection.

'Deranged,' I said.

'Beautiful,' said Dan.

He settled into the new home straight away. We were officially 'Team Dan and Deb'.

Our routine was established. Dan would stay with his dad on a Tuesday night and Steve would drop him back the next morning before heading to work, and then Dan would stay with him Friday through to Saturday teatime.

'Hello, Daddy!' Dan would beam.

'Hello, Badger,' Steve would reply, scooping him into a big cuddle.

'What have you been doing at nursery today?'

'Err, pooing in my pants,' Dan replied, once, memorably.

Our first Christmas as a twosome was easier than I'd thought it might be. Dan was more excited by the prospect of presents than concerned with the household occupants. At 4.30 am on Christmas morning he padded into my room wearing his Santa hat, snuggled in beside me and asked, 'Has Father Christmas been yet?'

'No,' I said, muffled by sleep, willing him to close his eyes again.

He fidgeted for an hour, then reached over, turned my face towards him and stage-whispered, 'Do you think Father Christmas has drunk the drink, eaten the mince pies and the reindeer have eaten the

carrots?’

‘I suppose we’d better check...’ I sighed, and he shot downstairs. A frenzy of unwrapping, and he was back in bed at 8 am for an hour’s nap.

The new year turned without major drama. The ending of a ten-year relationship and the loss of the family home had been enough upheaval in 2005. I was working three days a week as a Development Officer at a Volunteer Centre, Dan at nursery for two of these. One day a week he went to Nanny and Grandad’s, the eternal constants in his life, in whose company he was completely secure, utterly cherished.

‘My nanny’s here!’ Dan would call excitedly when Mum came to pick him up. He would return home full of love and chocolate.

The days we had to ourselves we filled with as much fun as we could. Liz, Anna, and Joe would regularly come round after nursery and work as spring broke into summer. We’d turn teatime into ‘naughty teatime’ by adding a vodka to our diet colas. The boys would eat spaghetti hoops then play in the sandpit and paddling pool in our small, flagged garden. On other days, Liz and I would whisk them off to parks in other towns where we would eat ice creams with sauce and sprinkles, watch brass bands, and ride on miniature trains.

To celebrate Joe’s third birthday in August, we bought tickets for the Thomas the Tank Engine All Aboard Live Tour at Sheffield Hallam Arena. Brightly painted stage sets and giant-sized versions of their favourite trains, simple songs to join in with, the auditorium alive with the chaos of hundreds of other equally overexcited children. They were both entranced by the magic. Dan asked if we could stay there ‘all days’, and for the next week he strutted around in his ‘Thomas on Tour’ t-shirt, singing loudly:

‘It’s a very special daay

A VEEERRRRY special day

On the TRAAAIHIIINS!’

I had never expected to find such pleasure from the company of one other person, especially a small child. Every night, after teeth were brushed, I would read to him, cuddled up in his single bed. As I read, he would twirl his fingers through my hair, drifting into a place of calm and comfort.

‘Night, mummy,’ he’d mumble with a sleepy smile and then turn and curl his skinny body under the duvet. I would leave the room enveloped in soft wonder at the little boy whose presence filled me with warmth from head to toe. With Dan, I felt I had substance. With

Dan, I had a place in the world.

That place was not, however, a fixed spot. Dan was always on the move, and that meant I was too. He could not be left unattended, would not simply sit and play quietly.

'Dan, come back!' I would call in the park, abandoning buggy and bag to chase after him as he zoomed off beyond the big slide.

'Where were you going?' I'd ask, gripping his hand, marching back to the buggy with him skipping along beside me.

'I just wanted to see what was there,' he'd say, with a bright-eyed smile. Not deliberate mischief or disobedience, just immense curiosity and absolute faith in his ability to deal with the world on his own terms, despite not yet being of school age. This mix of inquisitiveness and eccentricity *was* Dan.

'I like being rare,' he said, when I queried him about his sometimes-offbeat behaviours. These sideways takes cropped up regularly. He'd pick up a phrase from a TV programme and play with it.

'Sniff dat', he'd say, shoving items—crayons, apples, worms—under my nose. Thank you, *Trap Door*. Or, he'd misuse a phrase; he'd eat all his tea, or put his own socks on, or use the potty effectively and announce, 'And the dentist will be really proud of me.' Or, watching leaves fall from trees, a squirrel bound over a wall, water going down the plughole, he would sigh and say, 'I'm really gonna miss those leaves/that squirrel/my bath'. Dan-isms everywhere, brightening my days like sunbursts.

We visited a local farm show. It had the usual attractions: bouncy castle, miniature train, and falconry displays. Dan dashed through the crowds with me crashing behind, apologising to those I batted out of the way, trying to keep up with him. Then he halted, captivated by a vicar waving an oversized plush turtle puppet as he entertained a dozen or so meekly seated children. Dan was transfixed as the vicar told a told a biblical tale.

'...and that's how Jesus fed so many people!' The vicar finished, making the turtle's mouth open in amazement. The children clapped, and Dan ran to him and reached up to deliver an enormous hug.

'What was that for?' I asked, as he bounced back to me.

'Because he really loves Jesus, and Jesus isn't here to give him a hug, so I did.'

He extended the same love to the spider plant I brought home one day.

'Oh!' exclaimed Dan. 'I shall call him Peter.'

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
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Finally, thank you to the cohort of 2020-21: those represented between these pages and those who are not. It's been a blast. Good luck out there.

While restrictions abounded in 2021, this year's Manchester Anthology affirms the power of literature to push boundaries, subvert rules and chart new ground.

Poems whose 'glistening, knife's-edge' lines dissect the lost innocence of young love and map pulsations of fresh desire. Creative non-fiction that mines as much hope from the weeding of back gardens as it does from an escape to the sun-drenched Key West. Stories that walk the line between dreams and reality, guilt and innocence, endings and new beginnings.

In the words of a character featured herein, this collection is 'anything but ordinary.'

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