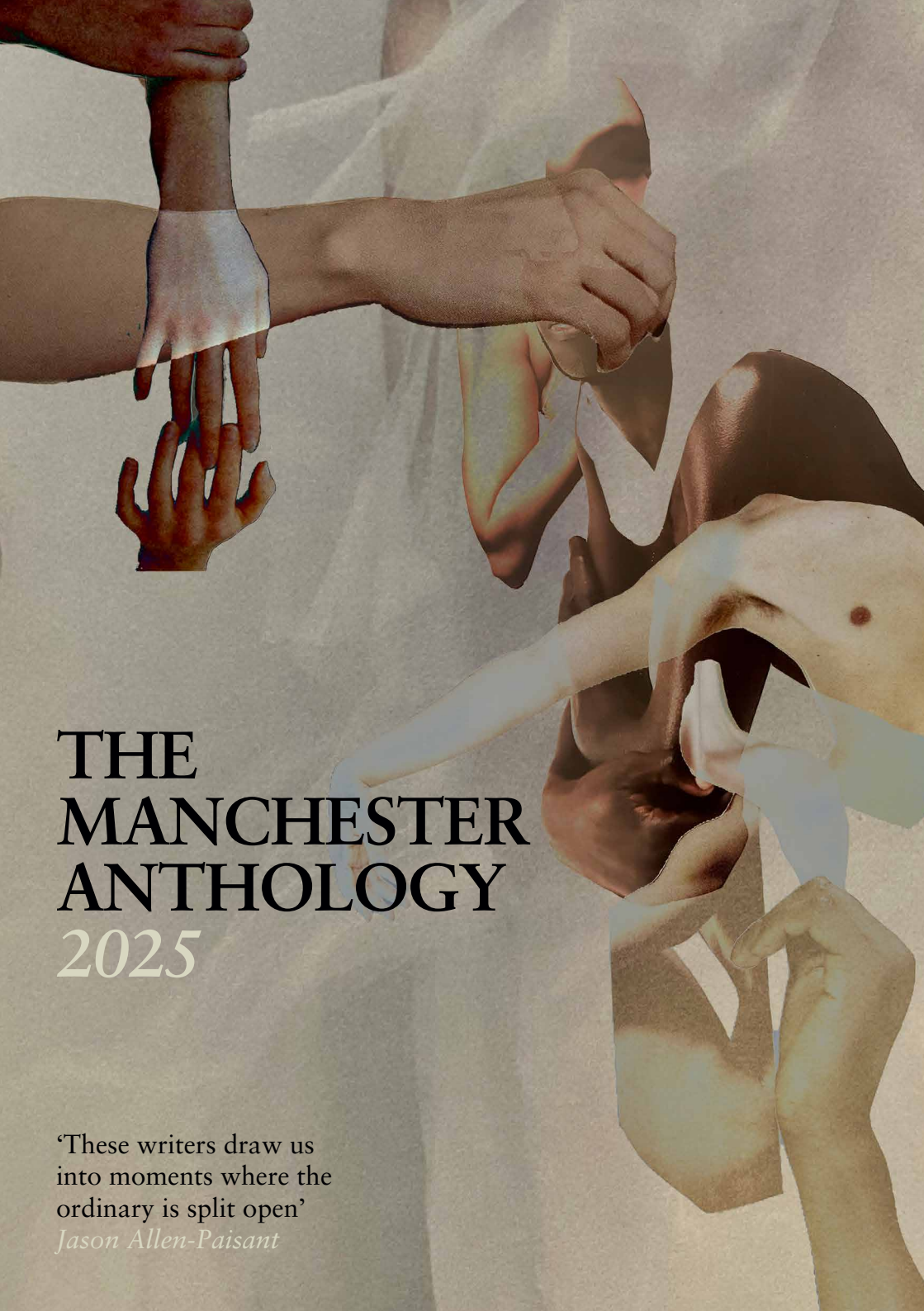




THE MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY 2025

‘These writers draw us
into moments where the
ordinary is split open’
Jason Allen-Paisant

THE
MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY
2025

“The poems in this Anthology are the product of a year spent learning, as Ellie Grant writes, ‘to sing an old, forgotten song’. The sense of community is strong in these poems, which take us to familiar places made strange and new, while offering a glimpse of unfamiliar, uncanny perspectives and embodiments. You will be ‘guided by whimpers’, and unsettled and moved by ‘the peek behind the curtains’ that these poems provide.”

— *Rebecca Hurst*

* * *

“These are works of daring and brio by students of marked talent and flair.”

— *Vona Groarke*

* * *

“This a book of adventures, into what we know and into what we imagine: I will gladly follow these writers into their other worlds, and trust poet Tom Pyle when he says:

‘This time they will not catch us.
I carry the route inside me
and feel each shiver in the road
surface.’”

— *John McAuliffe*

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FOREWORD

What unites the works in this Anthology is not genre, or style, or even subject matter, but a common insistence that life is lived under pressure. These writers draw us into moments when the ordinary is split open: a meditation interrupted by air raid sirens; a fox tearing into the quiet roost of hens; a sister's letter slipped secretly into a waistband. Again and again, what should be stable — a home, a body, a family ritual — is revealed as precarious, fragile, haunted.

Some of this pressure comes from history itself. Anastasiia Lebedenko, writing out of contemporary Ukraine, shows how everyday rituals — meals, yoga, work calls — are ruptured by alarms. Anne Boyd Rioux, setting her novel in 1940s Europe, makes visible the way war shadows even the smallest domestic encounters. In different ways, both suggest that war is not only a geopolitical event but a constant interruption of intimacy, writing, and care. Jill Craig, by contrast, brings us into the slow rhythms of a poet's household, where anxiety works subterraneously, never quite named, yet structuring every exchange. The pace is gentle, but beneath it a tension gathers, urgent in its quietness, unlike the clamour of war.

For others, the fracture comes from migration and return. In Cleo Mace's *Salvage*, Lia, a trans woman, travels back to her small hometown. The geography of home becomes estranged: objects from childhood, streets once familiar, all tinged with surveillance and memory. Desire here is not just sex but reclamation, a salvaging of visibility. In this, Mace echoes what Craig and Rioux show in other registers: that movement — between city and small town, between past and present — is never simply a backdrop but constitutive of identity itself.

The family, too, is a crucible for pressure. Sunita Nair's continuation of *Pride and Prejudice* reminds us how much energy bourgeois families expend on performance — what can be said, what must be concealed, how happiness must be managed for an audience. Alexandria Mowrey's *Matron Saints* offers the inverse: secrecy rather than performance, the things buried beneath the floorboards. Seen through the eyes of an eleven-year-old eavesdropper, the adult world is glimpsed in fragments — a letter

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without a stamp, an aunt's sudden pallor. If Nair stages the theatre of propriety, Mowrey gives us the gothic underside, where children inherit what cannot be spoken, just as other stories here reveal how women absorb unspoken violences in the silences of domestic or communal life.

For several poets in the Anthology, it's the body itself that becomes the site of fracture. Rhiannon Price writes of medication, childhood objects, and stray animals with an unsettling intimacy — comfort and violence bound together. Astrid Meyer refracts embodiment through art and history: Pompeii's plaster casts, Mary Stuart's embroidered brocade, the doubled body of representation. Amber Souch inhabits predator and prey alike — hens hunted, foxes sated, lovers consumed through tequila, salt, and lime. Cole Sliwinski, writing in prose, turns to dance as a way of staging trans embodiment: the body disciplined, adorned, refracted in motion, revealing gender as both artifice and becoming. These works insist that identity is not an abstraction but is lived in muscle, sweat, blood, and metamorphosis — and in the quiet endurance of bodies that carry both care and harm, intimacy and threat, often within the same walls.

Other contributions hold a mirror to genre and temporality themselves. Olivia Gledhill retells Orpheus and Eurydice as a Western, but in doing so exposes not only the genre's stubborn persistence — its desert landscapes, its white-settler gaze — still intact beneath the myth, but also the limits of the retelling itself, which risks reinscribing rather than unsettling those familiar tropes. Elizabeth Salusbury, more playfully, writes of youth and late capitalism, where even the evanescence of childhood is shadowed by the frozen after-life of commodities, and where the grotesque intrudes uncannily into the everyday — bloody eyes in Tesco, freezer meals that outlive their lifespans. Both remind us that we inherit not just histories but forms, and that genres themselves can be both pressure and constraint.

What, then, do these works share? Each in its own way is preoccupied with interruption — by war, by secrecy, by movement and migration, by desire, by genre. Each explores estrangement — of home, of body, of time. And each finds persistence within rupture: foxes curl into each other after the hunt, friends laugh their way up Bole Hill after a night of chaos, spores push through brickwork, meals are resumed after alarms. Again and again the body itself emerges as a frontier — disciplined, adorned, desired, or returned to — its shiftingness both risk and resource.

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This Anthology is not a single story but a record of how many ways there are to live when stability cannot be taken for granted. To read across these works is to encounter survival, transformation, and becoming in their plural forms: small songs of overlooked beauty, gestures of repair, fragments of joy alongside fragments of dread. What they offer us is not consolation, but an invitation — to see how, even under the greatest pressures, life insists on continuing.

— *Jason Allen-Paisant*

NON-FICTION

Anastasiia Lebedenko

SILENT SHELTER

Day 1

I get into the stranger's car. Her face carries the signs of exhaustion, and her mouth produces a thick Russian accent, smiling: *Maria, vitayu*, welcome. Minutes later, I know: her exhaustion relates to a hectic apartment renovation she's desperate to escape, while her awkward Ukrainian arises from her place of birth, the now-occupied city of Donetsk. As she looks to the road, I connect her urgency to finish the renovation with her earlier loss of home. Once we complete the basic Q&A, we move to the classic Ukrainian small talk: Where were you when the full-scale invasion started?

'I stayed in Kyiv the whole time. It was terrifying, of course, especially the first week. Well, you know, why am I telling you... But I could not leave home. Not this time, not anymore. Not when I got the apartment already and threw a bunch of money into it,' Maria looks to the road with tiredness. 'That's why I'm here. I just need a break from this madness. And you?'

Why am I going on a four-day silent retreat with a group of strangers? I wonder where to start. More than two years into the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I still haven't found my ground. I have spent these years as a nomad, moving from country to country, now about to stop in the UK for the next year. My grand resettlement there is bound to unravel in a week. But, for now, I decided: breathe in, breathe out. Retreat.

And so I'm here, with one uncomfortable correction: this four-day retreat takes place in the war zone. Not on the frontline, no, but in a little village in Kyiv region, where we're heading.

All the way to our retreat location, we keep talking of all things significant and insignificant, aware that this privilege will be soon revoked.

A blue village sign greets us: *Glibivka*. First of the group, we explore the territory. It's a private hideaway of several wooden lodges in the depth of forests facing the Kyiv Sea, a reservoir on the Dnipro river. The smells hit me the moment I step out — the pines, the river, the soil. Inhaling all that, walking around, I notice the silence. We're the only guests. I wish for nothing to disturb the stillness between me and this place.

Nothing in it gives away the spirit of death that Russians brought here two years ago. I looked it up on the news: 'village liberated after 38 days of occupation'; 'looting and kidnapping'; 'Glibivka resident facing trial for cooperating with the occupants'; 'bodies identified through DNA samples'. As I look into the unsteady water, I recall one article in particular: the village head describing the first days of the invasion. Escaping the occupation, local residents evacuated through the river. Not everyone made it to another shore: one of the boats capsized and sank. Eight people drowned, including a four-year-old child. Only three bodies were found.

Glibivka didn't make it into the big news; its tragedy was nothing unusual by Russian occupation standards. Another accident, another casualty of war. There were dozens, hundreds of Glibivkas around Ukraine.

Cars carrying the remaining four participants pull over. We exchange our first awkward glances and hi's. Before we can say our names, the woman who gathered us here starts speaking. She looks exotic against this pale Eastern European landscape: dark tan of South Asian origin, platinum blonde curls in a messy bun, hippy clothing with a brush of elegance. She moves with the grace of a dancer, giving each of us a heartfelt hug. Kate, the spiritual teacher. She now lives in Bali and announces her rare visits to Ukraine on social media. That's how we all got here — through an Instagram post advertising this retreat.

Our leader steps into her role immediately. She orders us to take our rooms and meet her in the common area. I enter the house first, examining our shared kitchen and the two floors. The rooms look similar — light timber, two single beds, two bedside tables, a window — except for the view. I pick the quietest one, looking out to the forest. Then unpack my belongings, change into comfortable clothing, and grab my yoga mat.

Gliding through the thin smoke of burning Palo Santo wood, we enter the candle-lit space. I can barely see the women's faces in this dim room.

Kate asks us to say our names as we arrange our yoga mats in a circle. Maria, Daria, Diana... their names tell me nothing. Why are they here? What worries them? But Kate doesn't want us to know. She softly explains the army-like regimen of our retreat:

'We wake up at 5am for our first meditation. No alarms, just my gong. Dress comfortably. We'll be meditating five hours a day, sitting, for one hour at a time. The point is to remain completely still, eyes closed, looking inward. But if pain becomes unbearable, shift around a little. We'll have walking meditations right after the sitting ones. The point here is to focus on your movement. We eat twice a day, at 7:30 and 14:30. The food is simple: a three-course vegetarian meal. If you're hungry, you'll have free time to grab a bite during the day, don't worry. Once we enter the silence, no talking, no eye contact. Only seek to be completely with yourself. Lastly — the phones. You can turn on silence mode and pass them to me right now.' Obediently, we put the phones by her knees.

'I am your guide in and out of this silence,' Kate declares, and we follow her into our first meditation. And straight into the deep night's sleep.

* * *

Day 2

The vibration of a gong wakes me up, gently.

'Dress warm, it's cold out there,' Kate whispers into the room. As if in a fever dream, I slip into my sweater and out into the pitch-black forest. The sun hasn't yet risen when we start meditating.

I sit, and sit, and sit. My left leg dissolves under the pressure of stillness. In this darkness, everything else sharpens. A cool blow of wind brushes over the tip of my nose. A chorus of crows; rustling treetops; tapping woodpeckers in my ears. It smells of that hour just before sunrise. Finally, the sunlight trembles softly on my eyelids. How long has it been? Ten minutes, forty, an hour? I start to doze off, losing my posture. My neck slowly gives in too.

Until — here's my alarm. The air raid siren. An electric current pierces through my spine and blasts my eyes wide open, involuntarily. Everyone sits still; I shut them again. A menacing male voice says through the

speaker: *Uvaga, povitryana tryvoga!* Attention: Air raid alert. Proceed to the bomb shelter immediately.

I never knew death had a *sound* — not until my first air raid alert. Hearing its wailing pitch, some freeze, awaiting. Others adopt a nonchalant ‘let it be’ attitude. But not me. Every time I heard death, I ran. Out of cafes, leaving my half-finished meals. Work calls. Warm morning beds and the last of my dreams. Calm evenings. Arguments. Romantic tensions. ‘Excuse me, I have to run from death’ — I exited abruptly, apologetically. I ran to the closest Earth indentation and buried myself underground.

But now, now there is nowhere to run. Where do you hide? Behind this pine tree? Will this wooden house protect me? This little village seems too incongruent with the reality of attacks. Here, I can’t run and hide. I can’t even move. I’m shelterless, weaponless, defenceless. I can only control the order of my breath. Depth. Frequency. In and out. I can examine my thoughts like a border guard — one by one, allowing some, rejecting others.

Although it lasts just a minute, the siren remains hovering in the air. I wonder if it represents my annoying conscience, returning me to reality each time I walk away. An all-seeing Big Brother, it purposefully disturbs me when I forget I’m somewhere but a war zone. Is that what gurus are seeking in meditation, this fully alert state of being?

Buddhists believe that nothing is permanent. Hence, death is ever-present, woven into life. They go to great lengths to remind themselves of this daily, through death awareness meditations and the like. But here, I don’t have to make an effort to acknowledge death — it’s everywhere. War is the most extreme reminder of presence. Forcing you to focus on here and now, because the next moment might not exist.

In this silence, eyes shut, my body turns into hearing. Every sound becomes a suspect. I can almost hear the whistle of a missile flying from somewhere far away — in the breath of that woman next to me, in the roar of a car engine passing by, in the creaking of doors. I examine each frequency, like a wild animal looking for prey. Only I’m the prey, and the missile is the predator. Can it sense my fear?

We move on to walking meditation. It feels ritualistic, six women making circles around these trails. This is my chance to steal glances, examine them — except for the eyes. I play the guessing game: What’s

her profession? Is she a mother? Why is she here? A tall gracious dark-haired woman is moving slowly and intentionally, barefooted. She looks like a female deity with her perfect posture and a long elaborate kimono. I'll ask her where she bought it when we get our voices back. The next woman approaching is wearing Hermes sandals; are they comfortable for her forest walk? Her striking blue eyes look straight ahead, hypnotised by the movement. And here's Maria in the background, shorter than others, and a bit quicker too. Is she thinking of her renovation to-do list?

Meditation is over. But the alarm is not; the threat remains. In our free time, I opt for the hammock suspended from the pines. I look at the sky, aware of the possibility of seeing a missile at any second. But until then, I'm here. Absorbing scorching sun rays through my skin. Smelling pine-saturated air. Feeling my hair sway gently to the rhythms of the wind.

* * *

Day 3

What day is it?

From dawn till sunset, sirens keep going on and off, on and off. They've become a part of our schedule. We eat with their howling, walk in them, get lost in them. Sirens have replaced the ticking of the clock, counting the minutes till sleep.

Whistle. Explosion. Whistle. Explosion. Whistle. Explosion. Going off somewhere in Kyiv, it seems. I recognise them instantly — ballistic missiles. Their absolutely monstrous, sheer power hits the Earth right in its solar plexus and shakes it to the inner core. Each wave hammers me deeper into the mattress. The last one hits closest, and the wooden walls of my shelter vibrate, shaking in fear. This fear paralyses my whole being, spilling over, sticking to my heart, my lungs, my throat; freezing, cementing into my cells. I want to ask somebody, anybody, if they hear what I hear. But my neighbour is snoring, unbothered.

It's better to remain still; maybe it won't notice me. A silly thought, but at this moment, it is my truth. Something in me screams 'run', yet I can't move. Run where? Into the forest? To the border? My body is my only shelter. Just make it until the gong.

* * *

Day 4

The gong fires off like a starting gun in my brain. I jump up, ready to break the rules. ‘I didn’t sleep and heard all of the explosions. Is the alarm over? I’m scared,’ I scribble on paper. I pass it to my teacher, gaze down. She seems surprised by such a transgression at first, then softens and whispers: ‘Yes, it’s off now.’

When we enter the common room, I inspect faces one by one, looking for signs of fatigue shared, of sleep disturbed, a night not slept. Nothing. They look calm, well rested. *It’s just me again.* Just me. Still dazed, I go into the morning meditation. My body sits up unusually straight this time, still fuelled by the nightly adrenaline.

I leave the common room last when Kate whispers to me again: ‘Are you feeling extremely anxious?’ I nod without lifting my gaze. She puts her hand on my shoulder in a preacher-like manner. ‘In the next meditation, breathe it all out. All the fear you have in you. Dive into it. Walk through it to the deepest extent possible. And if you’re scared of death, live through it as though you’re already dying. Experience it till the last drop.’

I nod again, silently. Yet I want to say so much: how I’m the only person I know that is still scared of the attacks; how I accepted this defeat and left the home I loved; how every time I hear a missile, I think it will be me this time, *it will surely be me*; how the sound wave of every explosion sticks like a permanent marker used on the wrong whiteboard, muddies everything with it, becomes impossible to erase. But words never helped, never changed anything. The same paralysing terror hits me as though imprinted on my DNA. It’s not something I can talk through, over, away — *it just is*. Words only help me run away: away from confrontation, fear, the possibility of death. It is time to try silence.

For the next meditation, we’re in the forest again. Like a cruelly rehearsed joke, the siren goes off when we sit down. Minutes later, intense gunshots come from across the river; air defence brigades are shooting down Shahed drones. We enter the silence to the orchestra of woodpeckers and guns. For the next hour, they don’t stop.

Every time they find a trigger, I inhale. Every time they pull it, I exhale even deeper. I'm in the depth of a storm, my body a small wooden boat against it. Fear comes over me in crushing waves, throwing me out, pulling me in. What if I die? What if I die *right now*? War has taught me this: each moment can become a death scene. I've read too many of these: 'A family gathered together for an anniversary dinner. A direct hit, all dead.' My anxiety convulses, streaming out in tears and marching in goosebumps. I cry the longest I've cried since the start of this war — in the roar of explosions and my own silence.

Amidst it all, I recall the words of Marina Abramovich, an artist known for her near-death performances: 'Pain is a door. A secret door into a different state. Without these doors, you can't reach it. Afterwards, you no longer fear pain.' Suddenly, sunlight showers my body. And here I am, on the other side of the storm.

Moments later, we exit the meditation. I open my eyes; their moisture and salt burns under the morning sun. It's the end of our silence. The first words spoken are a chorus of thank-you's for Kate.

'Thank yourselves for what you've been through,' Kate smiles warmly. 'Now let's head for our last meal together, shall we?'

In a minute, the women start twittering, talking over each other: I had such a sharp back pain on day three, it was unbearable; my whole body went numb, even my fingertips; how do others do these retreats for 10 full days? They share their motivation to come here: all locals, living in Kyiv, who needed a little break, for one reason or another. The deity takes a vape out of her kimono and holds on to it like an asthmatic to an inhaler. 'I just can't give up, horrible, I have no self-control!' she complains in an unexpectedly low voice.

As we sit down at the table, Kate says, 'Girls, hold on. I know you want to talk now, but just try to sit with it all for a while.' I smile. I'm the only one not talking. I find myself reluctant to exit my silence, to pick up my phone. I don't want to leave the fragile peace I have found. But I do break it for one question.

'Did anyone hear the missiles?'

A chorus responds: Was there an attack? I didn't hear it either, must have slept right through it; I heard it, but didn't bother to wake up. Kate

softly looks me in the eyes but says nothing. They move to the next topic.

In an hour, I'm back at Maria's car.

'That was so productive for me, you know. I thought through everything left to do in the apartment. I think I'm ready to go back now,' Maria chirps away.

'That's great, Maria,' I say, but my mind is elsewhere. *It was just me, again.* Nobody heard it. Nobody even noticed.

I remember a question I once asked to my friend living in Kyiv:

'Why don't you react to the attacks anymore?'

'The first days of the war were the most terrifying experience of my life. Everything else pales in comparison to them... And, after all, what if I did react each time? How could I *live*?'

Is this why I react so strongly? After all, I wasn't in Ukraine when the war started; I had left just a few days prior. Not baptised by the initial shock of war, I'm doomed to react to each attack as if it's the first one.

For these women, this retreat is just a break from their war-life routine, a getaway. Perhaps their nervous systems have adapted after years of non-stop danger, experiencing neither the sirens nor the attacks as a threat. Their life has become an uninterrupted death awareness meditation, while they have become war-time Buddhists, accepting death's proximity in order to survive. And to come back home, I must learn to live with it too.

I look out of the window and into the stillness of the Kyiv Sea. Maybe one day, I'll reach their state of acceptance. I'm one step closer to it. Until that missile breaks in, I have my silence.

Rīa Fay-Berquist

LONGING

Longing, an extract from a memoir of the same name, is an account of my search for answers, treatment and community while fighting the novel post-viral illness, Long COVID. The book takes an in-depth look at the infrastructure and culture of both the American and British healthcare systems, and the patient communities that have mobilized in response.

December 2023

I am sitting cross-legged at the edge of my perch: a timber cabin on stilts, built into the face of the Appalachian Mountains. I am surrounded on all sides by oaks and hickory trees, their slender, scaly trunks six- or seven-stories tall. Just weeks ago they were flush. Their naked branches are veins now, extending towards each other in a canopy, through which I have watched the sun rise over the Blue Ridge Mountains for almost two months.

These peaks sit on the other side of a plateau bisected by the French Broad River. They are named for their apparent hue, a haze that refracts sunlight through the coniferous forest's isoprene and ozone. The mountains are so large, so majestic, that even from seventy miles away they appear as close neighbors. They are most well known for their Appalachian Trail — a two-thousand-mile trek that draws both uber-athletes and pilgrims alike, a secular cousin to the Camino de Santiago. There are more than thirty-five thousand peaks in this range, spanning the north to southeastern United States, Maine to Georgia. I am wedged into one such peak, high above the trail's outpost in Hot Springs, North Carolina, in a rainforest. There are a dozen cabins like mine spread out over seventy acres. At the moment, only mine is occupied full time.

I am not here to hike, however. I am here to see if I can heal. My autonomic nervous system has been hijacked by illness. I can't walk, or

stand, for longer than a few minutes before my heart begins to race at 120, 160, 180 beats per minute. Blood is being rapidly shunted away from my heart and brain when I am upright; my vasculature is operating in a panic state. When I defy my body's limits, I trigger days or weeks where I feel like I'm being poisoned from within.

While this disequilibrium began with the same virus that everyone the world over was exposed to at the beginning of 2020, what exactly has continued this cascade of attacks on my cells is unknown. It is maddening not to be able to rely on my body — this container that I can't escape, or disassemble to find the defective part and replace it. Fighting this spectre has broken my spirit and my will to live over and over again, and I am here to save my life.

Since arriving here, there are more days when my mind is clear, and fewer days when I feel like there's a dense gas descending upon my brain, the fog being less impermeable. My resting heart rate has gone down a little bit every few days — evidence of my body regulating itself. I still don't know what is happening inside of me, but the mountains have made me a believer. I have begun to believe in life again, in part through bearing witness to it.

At the moment I am watching a fawn, no mother in sight. It pokes its nose around and around the autumn leaves at the foot of a jagged mound of shale, one of many smoke-colored sedimentary formations that bulge almost horizontally from the mountain walls in this region. I have been seated here in my screened-in porch, unmoving, wonderstruck, for nearly twenty minutes. I imagine the doe must be close, and relish the intimacy of this fleeting moment.

When I first arrived, even nature's sounds were overstimulating. With no concrete structures or tall buildings to absorb and isolate noise, birdsong, the wind in the trees, and coyotes in the distance were all amplified and distorted by the echo of the valley. The fog that descended over the peaks at sundown made it difficult to see outside, even with a headlamp. I was wired and hypervigilant.

These same noise distortions have now become familiar, and even amusing. Earlier this same day, I heard what sounded like a man's footsteps crunching up the leafy stairs of the front walkway. When I peeked out the window, what I discovered instead was a squirrel with a large nut

overtaking its mouth, leaping across the dry leaves like a mischievous cresting dolphin. The camouflage of nature is perfect. I hear animals all the time — the snuffling deer, howling wolves and coyotes, the call of crows, cardinals, and wrens — but aside from the squirrels, I rarely see them. The baby deer is the first long look I've been afforded. It is lanky, playful, curious — surprised by creatures it encounters as it moves the leaves, perhaps uncovering their nests or hovels. I will eventually have to leave the deer and go inside. I am packing. I am preparing to return home.

* * *

A year ago, I hobbled into a thirty-day post-operative check-up. I had undergone laparoscopic surgery to remove a benign mass from my abdomen. After a bit of small talk, my surgeon turns to me:

'So. How are you feeling?'

I am prepared for this part. I do not feel like I am recovering. I feel like I am getting worse. I have brought notes and symptom charts because I am also starting to feel insane. Though I do not admit this, I question whether what I am experiencing is real. The unrelenting fatigue didn't seem out of the ordinary at first, but I am becoming sensitive to light, and even the slivers that glow along the edges of my bedroom shades bring on crippling electrical-storm headaches, the pain near-blinding when I bend over. I am constantly nauseous. I can't read because I can't remember what I've read, and plots and ideas don't congeal.

'Let's take a look at your scars,' she says.

I stand up and lift my shirt to reveal my navel. She looks at each of my four incisions. One in my belly button for the laparoscope, two on either side for surgical instruments, one slightly lower, to extract the mass.

'These look good,' she says. I adjust my shirt and sit. 'The scars on the outside indicate what's going on inside. These look healthy. I don't think what you're experiencing is related to the surgery.' She pauses briefly. 'You might want to talk to your primary care doctor about Long COVID.'

The tears I have been holding back begin leaking out of my eyes. *You can't just say things like that without warning, I think. I don't think you are hearing me.*

What I knew about Long COVID at this time was a single devastating

image that kept me on top of all of my vaccinations and boosters. In this photo from *The Atlantic* is a young woman, twenty-eight years old, a former distance runner, being carried up her front steps by her equally young husband. It is winter in upstate New York, and a wheelchair in the background is parked haphazardly in the snow. A former nursing home dietician, she recalls her COVID infection as feeling like the common cold. Then her whole life collapsed.

I try reasoning with my smart, adept surgeon — one recommended to me by another doctor who had the same surgery with her at the helm. *I took Paxlovid. It was over in about a week. I didn't have any of these symptoms while I had the virus. I was not hospitalized.* She listens to each protestation with patience and compassion, but does not change her assessment. I leave the office numb. I am so exhausted that the walk back to my car confuses me and I go too far. I back-track up a San Francisco hill to find it, the whole time fighting the urge to lay down on the sidewalk.

A week later, the considered pause my doctor takes before responding to my surgeon's report signals what's to come. She has a sweet, high-pitched voice befitting of a kindergarten teacher. It always feels like she is being kind. She is kind.

'We're not going to call it Long COVID yet —'

'I don't think it is Long COVID —'

'But you are going to have an uphill battle, from having the virus and surgery so close together. This isn't the kind of fatigue you can push through — it will just make things worse.'

When I was a toddler, my mother would read me stories until my lids looked heavy, and wait until I fell asleep to sneak out of my room — only to hear me singing to my stuffed animals a few minutes later. Stasis of any kind makes me fidget, but I begrudgingly learn about rest and pacing protocols: small tasks immediately followed by periods of rest.

Everything now requires three to four times as much energy as before. Loading the dishwasher can only be done in phases. I reread emails three to four times, out loud, in order to catch the gist. I am unable to retrieve simple words I have known for thirty years, and lose track of what has already been said in conversation, especially over the phone. What was effortless before now causes flare-ups: sore throats, nerve pain, sound and light sensitivity, and cognitive delays.

I continue to see my doctor every two weeks. Things do not improve. There are new symptoms: tinnitus, heart palpitations, blurred vision, sensations in my hands that feel like I am holding broken glass. One of my bosses calls and asks me to complete a simple administrative task — manually entering about twenty two-digit numbers from one spreadsheet to another. I pull up the documents on dual monitors. I look at the figure on one monitor, and by the time I've turned my head to the other, I have already forgotten what it was. It takes me almost two hours to complete.

Hearing this, my doctor finally insists I have Long COVID.

'You've been textbook since the beginning, Rīa.'

This is information I cannot integrate. I accept the technical terms of the diagnosis, I recognize the evidence, but I believe my doctor is wrong. My brain will not synthesize this information. It will absolutely not allow me to believe this is true. I can see the words Long and COVID like neon signs flashing in the distance, but they do not belong to me.

* * *

At the end of 2022, nearly three years into a pandemic, the fact that I hadn't yet had COVID felt miraculous. I was the only person I knew in my peer group that hadn't had the virus, and this gave rise to a kind of misguided confidence. I wondered if it were possible I had been infected early on and that my illness had been asymptomatic. Since I knew of no one in my immediate or extended family that had been infected, maybe I was genetically lucky. I did not adopt a laissez-faire attitude towards prevention because of this belief; I stayed on top of all my vaccinations and boosters, and I continued to mask and run air purifiers. So far into the pandemic, I thought the variants would be milder — and that when I was inevitably infected, I would get a few days off work, and then I would be immune for a while. There is no way to quantify the absurdity with which I view these "facts" from where I stand now.

There are theories, four to be exact, about what might cause Long COVID: viral persistence (the virus doesn't clear the body, replicates, and wreaks havoc on a variety of organ systems); viral reactivation (the introduction of the virus reactivates dormant Epstein Barr or herpesviruses like shingles,

causing immune system dysfunction); autoimmunity (elevated levels of antibodies attack healthy tissues and cells); and neuroinflammation (what is often categorized as *brain fog* is likely a symptom of brain damage to the brainstem and frontal lobe).

I spend the bulk of my available energy every day trying to discern which, based on my ever-evolving symptom clusters, is likely to be the culprit in my case. *How much virus is still in my body? Are spike proteins active? How do I make my cells stop attacking themselves? Immunomodulators? Guided visualization?* I read every available book on Long COVID and every medical research paper I can find that describes my symptoms. Some weeks I have specialist appointments every day.

I join virtual support groups — international communities of long-haulers, as people with Long COVID have begun to call themselves. We are all trying to heal ourselves in the absence of federally approved treatments. Many are prescribed off-label medications established to treat other conditions and take fistfuls of supplements to manage their most identifiable symptoms. Others experiment with nicotine patches, testosterone gel, cold water therapy, and Ivermectin. Some sign up for clinical trials that can involve incredible risk.

None of the teachers and few of the nurses in my new communities have returned to work. Because the best medical research shows that viral reinfection risks permanent damage to our organ systems, particularly the central and peripheral nervous system (brain, spine, and everything they enervate and control), we are all having our own protracted lockdown while the rest of the world moves on. We quit social media when watching friends carry on with their lives becomes painful. We see them in house parties and festivals and worry about them ending up like us, while simultaneously envying their freedom. It is lonely, we feel forgotten, and with our new limitations, as we watch the pace of medical and government action crawl, it is easy to believe that our lives no longer have value.

When my younger sister was twenty-six, she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. The shock of the cancer diagnosis launched friends and our large, close-knit family into action. Funds were raised for her, whole convents of nuns were asked to pray for her. She did not go to her appointments alone.

When I became ill sixteen years later, and five years after both my

grandparents passed in quick succession, our family was more fractured. I sent explanations for my absences at family weddings, messages and articles about Long COVID, but the circling of wagons never came. It felt like my family didn't believe me, so I stopped reaching out. I felt alone and disconnected.

In retrospect, I wonder differently. My experience is not unique amongst long-haulers. Rallying around the ill, moving mountains to find treatments, starting meal trains are all rare in our cases. In public health, "disease burden" measures the impact of illness on individuals and societies, and can include infectiousness, mortality, longevity, and economic measures. Experts equate Long COVID patients' burden with cancer or other severe chronic diseases, but there is a critical difference: those conditions (and their treatments) are widely known facts. These facts are real to us, and because of that, the social support follows. In the absence of familiarity, perhaps loved ones find our new disabilities difficult to face, and feel poorly equipped to accompany us. Perhaps our illnesses make their own aging and mortality more tangible to them. Perhaps they feel powerless, as we do, and daunted by the kind of Herculean endurance all chronic illness requires. In my most circumspect moments, I feel a kind of sadness — compassion for their fear and vulnerability, mixed with pity. But when I arrive in North Carolina, hindsight is still on the horizon. I feel like a bottomless pit of need, and what I need — answers, political will, a future — are things that only time can deliver.

In the mountains, I have one neighbor within walking distance, which turns out to be enough. He is five years older than me, a gold-bespeckled former monk and former punk, and now the chef in the retreat center down the mountain. He is South Indian and from Texas, and offers this as an explanation for his being perpetually underdressed for the weather. We meditate together and sometimes I make him dinner or cookies because he has a sweet tooth and spends his days feeding other people. Our new friendship nurtures me, but my most profound sense of connection comes from the awe I feel when I look out my windows every day.

The forest is alive, active, dynamic. Every day the horizon looks different. On clear days, orange and fuchsia leaves, rapidly thinning but still visible, pop from across the valley. On colder days, sheets of fog ripple over the surrounding peaks rhythmically, like ocean waves. The absence of traffic,

of people, has sharpened my sense of belonging in and to nature. Rather than isolating me, my remote outpost has enlivened my relationship to this life force of exceptional magnitude. I am no longer stuck in the same questions and fears. I feel lighter, as if I am on the cusp of something great.

One good health day, my neighbor and I eat dinner on my porch and talk about grief.

‘The *why me?* phase of it all must have been the hardest,’ he says confidently.

I am surprised by this, because *why not me?* There are millions of people dealing with this. I may even be one of the lucky ones.

‘The people who caught the virus before vaccines are doing so much worse,’ I counter. He shrugs and casually suggests that maybe I haven’t taken time to acknowledge the toll the illness is taking on me.

‘I can’t,’ I say. ‘I’m too busy fighting to get well.’

* * *

The fawn has disappeared without my noticing. Not even a rustle. The vigilance I arrived with has been sanded down by attrition; by wonder, presence, the velocity of this atmosphere. Preparing to leave now, I recognize that I am afraid. Fearful that if I’m kind to myself, I will lose the fight, and my life will unravel again.

When I try to take in the complexity and enormity of this event, and this task — trying to heal what the most brilliant and committed minds in science have not yet been able to — I can’t believe I haven’t given up hope altogether. But this is a high moment. The first transition. It won’t stay like this, but I will remind myself on good days, and especially bad: hope is a discipline.¹

¹Mariame Kaba

SHORT STORIES

Cleo Mace

SALVAGE

This piece is the first half of the short story *Salvage*. It is one of a few pieces that form a collection of stories, all centred on trans women and their lives. Feel free to get in touch with the author if you'd like to read the second half.

When she reaches the scrapyard, Lia texts the guy.

I'm here

She stands a few yards from the gates and examines the graffiti on them. A jungle-scape sprawls across the metal. Vines dangle down over creatures emerging from undergrowth. The scene is caked with scrawled tags, dull and ugly. She tries to remember how long the graffiti's been there. Twenty years? Longer?

Her phone buzzes.

one sec

She glances up and down the industrial estate. Everything is concrete and metal, bar one small patch of dry, yellow grass, and there's no one around. She can just about make out the train station and even that's abandoned. The overhead wires appear to wobble in the heat. It's almost October, but no one seems to have told the weather. Low clouds press down overhead, but it hasn't rained in weeks.

Lia checks her tote bag. Keys to her mum's, her baccy pouch, two loose tenners, and a kitchen knife, resting in a folded-up flannel shirt. She feels silly, having brought the knife. She's bought weed from this dealer before, albeit a while ago. But never from here. She holds the bag away from her to confirm that the knife can't be seen through the canvas, and, to her relief, it cannot.

Scuffed footsteps sound from behind the gate, inside the yard. Lia tucks the bag under her arm. There's some clanging, and then the gate opens. Its

hinges shriek under its own weight.

In the opening stands the dealer. He looks her over and then glances down the street. Lia doesn't remember his face, but she's only ever seen him when picking up from his car before. He's boyish in the way that some men in their thirties can be, thick hairy knees poking out beneath cargo shorts. He scratches at a few inches of beard just below his chin. She reckons they're probably the same age.

She steps over to stand in the entrance with him.

'Hey,' she says.

'Alright?'

The scrapyard sprawls out behind him. Towers of crushed cars line the walls in wonky Jenga-like rows. A portacabin with a deck in front made of wooden pallets fills the back-left corner. And on top of the car stacks, along the wall to the right, is the body of a plane. No wings, nose, or tail. Just the dismembered belly of it. It's been there since she was a kid. It's small, for a plane. It could fit maybe forty, fifty people. She realises the dealer is looking at her expectantly.

Keeping the bag behind her, she fishes around for her money, then passes it to him. His eyes flicker up and down the road behind her, and then he takes the cash. His hands are calloused and a little grimy, and she smells oil on him. He slips the cash into a pocket and retrieves a little baggy of weed from another. He hands it to her. She drops it into her tote bag.

'Cool. Cheers,' Lia says.

He doesn't move, just carries on looking at her.

'All good?' she asks.

The guy smiles.

'I recognise you,' he says.

Lia grits her teeth. Not this.

'You used to buy from me a couple years ago, didn't you?'

She softens.

'Right, yeah.'

He nods.

'Did you move away, or...?'

'I – no, my mum lives here, I don't – like, I grew up here, but... I just come to look after her sometimes.'

Getting her words out is hard. She figures she probably hasn't talked to anyone but her mum in a week or so.

'I'm Mo,' he says.

'Right. Lia.'

They're both silent for a moment, and she wonders if she should be shaking his hand or something. He continues looking at her.

'Well,' she says, 'thanks.'

'No problem, any time.'

She turns and steps back to the pavement, then watches over her shoulder as Mo retreats to the yard and begins to push the gate shut, her view of the plane disappearing between the closing sheets of metal.

When she gets back to her mum's house, she has to slalom round various cardboard boxes just to get through the hallway. Slipping the knife out of her bag, Lia walks through to the kitchen, leaves the knife in the sink, and pours herself a glass of water. After drinking it, she holds the cold glass to her neck. Her mum, Kelly, is still out at the hospital, the car gone from the driveway.

On the kitchen top is a sheet of paper with *moving masterplan* scrawled at the top. Underneath the writing is a pencil-drawn table. The columns indicate different rooms of the house, and the rows, different stages of moving — sorted, dusted, boxed up, emptied, cleaned. Kelly's lungs can't take the dust so Lia's in charge of most of the move. Also, her mum can be a bit of a hoarder, and Lia is a minimalist by compulsion. She is an expert at throwing things away.

Looking at the sheet, she feels a wave of relief at seeing more sections ticked than not. Back to life soon. Out of this tiny town and back to the city. She wonders if she'll just be going back to more moving. She checks her phone and opens her messages from her housemate. Still nothing. The landlord sprung that he was selling their house a few weeks ago, and that he would know soon whether the buyer would allow them to stay living there. But since, he's been dead silent.

The next room on the list is her bedroom.

The room is simple. A single bed; a bedside table with a lamp, phone charger, and oestrogen pill sleeves on; the suitcase she's been living out

of propped open in the corner spewing out clothes; and a large wardrobe along one wall. There are a few generic, artsy prints on the walls, and a large, framed photo of Lia with her mum at a wedding together. She removes them from the wall and places them on one side of the room, the *keep* side. She opens the wardrobe and sighs. It is full of stacks and boxes of her old things, dating all the way back to childhood. Hung up on the rail is her old school blazer, a hoodie with her old name emblazoned above a giant '2006 Leavers' graphic, and a wedding dress. Her grandmother's. When she died, Kelly had found the dress and told Lia she'd keep it for when Lia gets married. Lia didn't have the heart at the time to point out the problems: she's probably never getting married — her relationships, then and now, exist within a strange ecosystem of trans women who are all girlfriends in loving but entirely noncommittal ways — and the dress is almost definitely miles too small for her. She piles the dress on top of the prints. The blazer and hoodie go on the floor by the door. The *bin* side.

A year or so after transitioning, Lia came to visit and discovered that all photos of her had been removed from the house. Her room had been stripped and repainted, with all trace of her gone. On the duvet were empty frames of various sizes, an old digital camera, and a ten-pound note. She and her mum spent the rest of that visit taking new photos together and picking some to put up around the house.

But her mum hadn't thrown the stuff out, and instead had buried it within cupboards and wardrobes. The first few boxes Lia had found had given her a strange sickly feeling. But that soon passed.

When she'd asked her mum what she wanted done with all these things, Kelly let out a long breath and then smiled. *It's up to you*, she had said.

Since then, Lia has been binning most things she finds. But there's a mounting stack of photos and random artefacts that she is avoiding making a decision on. They're in a box in the living room, a giant question mark scribbled onto the side of it with marker pen.

A couple of hours later, Kelly's car pulls up into the driveway, and Lia has mostly finished with sorting through her old things. Now, she's sat on the sofa playing a *Sonic* game on her old GameCube that she found buried away under her bed.

'Huh. Deja vu,' Kelly says as she walks through the door. She drops her handbag on the floor and flumps into the settee.

'I know. I'm twelve again.'

Lia pauses the game and looks at her mum. Her eyes are shut and beneath them are blue-green bags like bug-shells.

'How was it?'

Her mum blows a raspberry and gives her a *so-so* wobble of her outstretched hand, eyes still closed.

'They gave me another x-ray. Every time it's *probably pneumonia*, and every time I tell them it isn't.'

She coughs and lets out an exasperated sigh.

'What time's work?' Lia asks.

'Nine. Pizza for dinner, by the way. It's in the fridge.'

'Wow, I really am twelve again.'

Kelly's eyes flicker open; she reaches to her side for a cushion and throws it at her.

'Alright, missy,' she snaps. She rises slowly and goes to the door.

'Wake me up when dinner's ready, okay?'

'Will do, Mum.'

Kelly lingers for a moment, then speaks again.

'Are you staying in again tonight?'

Her voice has dropped into a cautious tone.

'Where else would I be?'

'Well, you could go to the pub, or... I just think you should get out the house.'

'I don't know anyone here anymore, so...'

Kelly makes a *hmm* noise, then shuts the door, and Lia listens to her plod up the stairs. She goes back to her game.

During loading screens and cutscenes she checks her phone. Instagram shows her various friends, posting about all the fun things they're doing. A few of the posts are from friends she has unread messages from, but she really doesn't have the energy to reply to them. Easier to just keep up to date with what they're doing through what they put online. In one post, a girl she knows from around has posted a picture swimming with friends in a lake. She recognises the lake as not far from where she lives. And then, the more she looks, she realises she recognises the other girls

too — all of them trans. One of them is a girl she's had an on-and-off thing with for the past year, and she's in the arms of another girl who Lia has suspected for a while is also fucking her.

Something dark and sticky wells up inside her. She's not usually the type for jealousy. How dare her friends have a good time without her. Self-hatred pricks at her. There's something about realising that those close to you have more exciting sex lives than you do that has always bothered her. *Pathetic girl*, she says to herself. Then, she remembers the weed she bought earlier.

In the garden, she forms herself a little seat out of old bricks and sits down. She rolls herself a small spliff using her knees as a little table. It's still hot and humid and cloudy. The pressure of it gives her a headache.

Having a little task to focus on steadies her mind a little. She's not here for much longer, and then she can return to life. And if she wanted to be having sex while she's away, she could. Although the reality of what that would be like in a town of a few thousand people feels unclear.

She lights up and inhales, the smoke hot and scratchy in her throat. She pushes against the need to cough. Smoking isn't something she really does anymore. The image of herself in her head makes her chuckle — taking a break from playing video games to go and get high, as if she's reenacting a moment from half a lifetime ago. If only her 17-year-old self could see her now.

Something about this teenage regression gives her an idea. She takes another toké and pulls out her phone. She locates the app she's looking for and downloads it. It takes a couple moments. When it's done, she opens the app and starts an account.

The picture she chooses is from a camping holiday. She is cooking bacon over a camp stove, still in her pyjamas, the morning light giving her hair a halo effect. The cami she's wearing shows off her tits well without being too obvious. She ticks the box for trans woman, which seems ridiculous. As if there would be cis women using this. The chance of finding another girl like her around here seems slim. It's been a long time since she's fucked a man, but that's probably the only option. She types into the description box.

here for a fling

trans – don't be weird about it

On the main page, tiles of faces and torsos and blank, empty profiles blink at her, and she immediately feels a bit silly being there. She isn't sure what to expect from Grindr. It looks pretty much exactly the same as it did the last time she used it, as a twenty-year-old. It was probably the only time in her life that she had had regular sex with strangers. Meeting up, fucking, cumming, leaving. The dates she goes on now are usually more complicated.

She scrolls through the profiles, but she isn't really sure what she's looking for. In the corner of the screen, she keeps getting notified that people are looking at her profile. She starts to get a couple of likes coming in. Then messages. She opens the first.

hey, you looking right now?

Then comes a photo of a middle-aged guy in a convertible car. Then him naked in the bathroom, pulling at his dick, a strange look of concentration on his face. She exhales and closes the app. How quickly that became overwhelming.

She stubs out the spliff. At least she has her GameCube.

Kelly comes down just as Lia is getting the pizza out of the oven. They quietly gather things for dinner — a bowl of salad, some glasses of juice, plates — and set up sitting on the sofa together in front of the TV. A quiz show is on, but neither really pay attention.

They scroll through their phones while they eat. Lia is careful to angle hers away from her mum.

She's received a few more messages. The first two are just random guys saying *hey*, both over twenty kilometres away, and both with seeking *TS/fem* in their descriptions. She tuts to herself, then moves on. Next, a blank profile, this time only a couple kilometres away. The messages contain a couple of selfies, with, hurrah, no dick-pics this time. But the face in the photos is incredibly familiar. She quickly realises it's a boy she went to school with — well, *a man*, now. She rolls her eyes. Lia still has her old Facebook page, name and photos stripped away from it, and from time to time, she scrolls it to spy on people whose lives were once connected to hers. This guy recently posted on there about the birth of his second kid, and how happy he and his wife are.

She's almost ready to throw her phone out the window, but forces herself to check her latest message, from *brownbear*. The profile picture is of a man in a thick corduroy jacket, somewhat wide-set, with dark curly hair. She smiles to herself. It's Mo, the dealer. She clicks on his profile and scans his description.

bi, 32

casual, ons, relationships, you name it

top/vers

She checks the message from him.

hey, don't mean to be weird

saw you and thought I may as well message

idk if you're interested i just think you're gorgeous

won't bother you again if not into it lol

Lia feels the lifting sensation of being found attractive, like a rush of wind travelling up over her on a hilltop. She types out a response.

cute of you. you aren't bothering me. glad you messaged.

She looks again at his picture. Behind him is a dense forest, and he's pointing at a mushroom just in front of him. There's something sweet and goofy about him. Her phone vibrates with a message.

oh nice nice

well if you ever want a smoking buddy...

She checks the time. Probably an hour until her mum leaves to work. She messages back.

How's tonight?

After Kelly leaves, Lia showers and shaves everything she can be bothered to. After dressing — jeans, strappy top, hoodie — she rummages around her mum's alcohol cupboard and finds some gin, which she pours into her orange juice. The taste is not good, but it leaves her feeling warm and silly.

She's back at the scrapyard at about ten o'clock. The night is nicely cool. She raps the knuckles of her right hand against the metal of the gate, which barely makes a sound. She kicks it instead, three times, firmly, and waits.

She's still pretty buzzed from the weed. Lampposts cast out eerie circles of light, dotted around the industrial estate. The neon sign of the shop

down the road fizzles away. The shop is shut, but she can just make out someone shuffling about inside. She thinks about her mum, sitting on the tills with her mask on all night. Why does a town this small need a twenty-four-hour supermarket, anyway?

There are footsteps, and for a moment, Lia is hit by self-doubt. What the hell is she doing here?

The gate swings open, and there's Mo.

'Hi. Again,' he says, and cracks a smile.

She clamps her feet to the ground to stop herself from running, and smiles back. He motions for her with his arm. She steps past him, into the scrapyard.

Cole Sliwinski

PLAY.

Unending, this rain. It began in time with rehearsal season, when we first took on this godless dance. The sky cracked open, and now the rain won't stop. We joke it must be a warning.

The downpour will take its toll on our studio. An old building, the best our troupe can afford, with a low ceiling and crumbling, bug-infested walls. Mold is sure to start growing soon, a damp muskiness already mixing with the usual wafts of sweat. The thumping of water against the roof is deafening, drowning out the sound of squeaking shoes and heavy breathing.

Your voice doesn't give in to the rain, your one and two and three and four is sharp and clear as always. Your commands shape the dancer's movements, taking these disparate parts and forming a solid whole, one moving machine. There's no music accompanying us when we rehearse, your voice takes the guiding role. Strands of hair have removed themselves from your tight bun, shaken free by the force of you, but you take no notice. The only thing impeding on your steadfastness is my presence, which you dutifully acknowledge, catching my eye at appropriate intervals. I try my best to smile.

I stretch by the barre rails, keeping warm while I wait my turn, my limbs feeling heavier than usual. Despite the makeup caked onto my face I am sure everyone can see how my features droop, how my eyes are close to falling out of my head, rolling onto the floor, landing right at your feet. You would kick them back to me, unphased as I pop them back into place.

It's the male dancers in front of us now, the Archers. Theirs is a militaristic routine, all sharp angles and firm movements. Each time you correct their technique, they all stop what they're doing and mimic you, a wave of bodies on repeat. You have worked hard to turn your woman's voice into something they must heed. The staccato of their feet against the

floor blends into the rain-sound, turning each dancer into one more drop within your storm.

One Archer stumbles, tripping on his heel, breaking the wave. He pants, hands on knees, and asks if he can get some water. You dismiss him, and he walks to the barre rails, squatting just in front of where I stretch, taking quick sips from his bottle.

I'm given a perfect view of the back of his neck. The way it curves into his shoulders, wide yet somehow compact, everything taut, sharp. His short hair fading into it, two dovetails, parallel. The way it precedes his back, something I've never understood, men's backs. When the male dancers rehearse shirtless, it's their backs that transfix me, curving inward even while the posture is straight, the spine forming a crevice running down, right down to meet the absence of hip, pulled tight and then let loose.

The Archer gets up to begin again, and I realize you have caught me staring. Refusing your gaze, I look into the mirror instead. It is myself my eyes focus on, until they drift, moving slowly to the fallen Archer's reflection. He is looking in the mirror too, and through the glass our eyes meet, and I look away, guilty.

Finally, the Archers leave the floor, and it is my turn. I stand alone in the middle of the room, with you standing in front me, all smiles. You've been enthusiastic since the beginning, so proud that I had gained a lead role so soon. I am unable to share your light-heartedness, perhaps because of the controversy tied to my role. The condemned dance, *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*, and me, the blasphemous lead. When it first opened, a threat of excommunication hung over all who attended, as the Church condemned the casting of a woman as Sébastien. I am not the best dancer in this troupe, but when in need of a woman to play a man played by a woman, our directors unanimously chose me. We joke that it was the dynamic you and I share that swayed them, my role as pseudo-man in a relationship between women. Still, I wonder if it's something else entirely.

You begin your count, and my limbs spring into action. I move on impulse, all muscle memory, focusing mostly on my expression, keeping it in that elusive space between graceful and stoic, that of mythical male youth. I see almost nothing in front of me when I dance. Just the distant swirl of the studio, crowded by vague images I've come to associate with

the piece, faces and places that don't exist and never will.

Your one and two and three, you push me back and forth. The Emperor is sending me to my death. I will make you a god, he sings, I will love you, I'll slit your throat! I stretch my arms outward, I hold my torso forward and then just as firmly stumble to the side, overcome, disfigured. With red we have painted stigmata onto my hands and feet, and as I move I make sure these wounds are visible, my palms held out towards you. My chest is bare, with tape we have pulled my breasts flat against my ribs. All I wear is a loincloth around my hips. I wonder what the audience will assume is beneath it, what the performance is hoping they will think.

When you decide we have had enough, you usher the dancers out of the studio and into the rain, bidding them to go straight home and rest. I pretend to stretch for a few more minutes, and only when we are sure the others are gone do we dim the lights. Then you are on me, and we are one.

You laugh at the ridiculousness of my loincloth, fumbling in your efforts to untie it from my waist. But I have tied it tight, and eventually I brush your hands away, instead peeling away your clothes, holding your body as best as my hands will let me. The setting sun slips past the rainclouds to pour down through the window and onto you, a sparse brightness revealing your face, and its holy vision is a stab of guilt in me, worse than any arrow.

In this half-darkness, no one can see my back. Here, where I can feel your body under mine and see nothing of myself, I can envision my neck, the way it curves into his shoulders, wide yet somehow compact, everything taut, sharp, two dovetails, parallel, pulled tight and then loose.

* * *

His sex feels like something we are holding between us. I forget that it is attached to him, and not to me. I tell myself it is something separate from either of us, that together we share it, bringing it from beginning to end.

It's an exercise in visuals, decoding this, figuring out if it is worth it at the same time that it's happening. It involves erasing me, or placing me over him, taking his place on this hotel mattress-turned-stage. I reconfigure the dials of who's seeing who, and from where, and as what, hoping to land somewhere that feels anywhere close to right.

It has very little to do with sensation, I'm realizing. I never orgasm. I hold onto this fact, as it somehow makes what I've done seem less carnal, moving it from the sexual into the abstract. In these small ways I circumvent my guilt, blur the lines.

As he puts his clothes back on, I can't stop staring at his hands. Their nails are cut jagged, hurried, almost no white left. The tip of his right ring finger bends slightly to the side, twisted at the joint. The wrist so narrow, a little indent in its side, somewhere to place your thumb were you to try and snap the hand off and keep it.

He sees me staring, and laughs, asking if there's something wrong. I shake my head, taking one of his hands and placing it against my own palm, still red-stained from the paint. I press the two hands together, feeling the ridges of his palm against mine, until they merge together, one hand held between two wrists. I breathe out, relaxed, and flex our fingers. He watches me, and his eyes are sad, but he doesn't pull away.

I hear the click of the door closing, and it's then that the dizziness takes over, and I rush to the bathroom, vomiting, knelt on the floor. The acid smell of it rises up to me, a slap in the face. I sit there, panting, hands gripping the toilet seat, until I'm able to pull myself together.

I text you that I'll be back from the store soon, and leave the hotel. Shielding my phone from the rain, I press red, erasing him.

* * *

The mold does grow. A dark patch at the center of the ceiling, tiny greenish black dots making up the larger stain. You say there must be a leak in the roof, the rain starting to make its entrance.

With a ladder we can reach the low ceiling, and we attack the mold with anything we can find, vinegar, bleach, holy water. Nothing works, the mold's will to live is impenetrable. We continue rehearsing as normal, the mold our first audience.

The dance opens in a few weeks, and it's all you talk about. The minute rehearsal ends, you relay the whole day back to me, as if I hadn't been there. Your constant talk gives me an excuse to keep quiet. It's the easiest place to hide, right in front of you, nodding along and smiling. I've found myself hoping you already know, have seen a notification on my phone,

can smell my betrayal on me. The idea of you knowing and still being here is my only hope, and the way I cling to it disgusts me.

After the performance, I tell myself, after the performance I'll tell you, I can't break your sprint now. Though it's not the when, but figuring out what I'll tell you that consumes me. Figuring out what it is that I have done, and for how long. Increasingly I think the directors have made a mistake. I am nothing like Sébastien, him noble and holy where I am cowardly and twisted, me hard where he is soft. His painted skin is nothing like the rough and brittle surface of my body. I have no way of becoming him.

One and two and three and four. I've practiced my death hundreds of times, and today once more. I stand at the center of the room and the Archers crawl forward, forming their cage around me. On your command they disperse, falling back like dominos. They spin, their legs springing forward in a winding coil, until they stop, their bows aimed at me.

I stand alone again with you in front of me, your count broadened by your smile. At your command the arrows embrace me, and I am guilty, guilty.

* * *

She wears a wig, cheap synthetic, and with it on she's a different person, more composed, solid. She tells me what to call each part of her body, and asks me what I call mine, to which I have no answer.

There's no decoration in her room. She tells me she's just moved here, hasn't had many guests. Which is a shame, she says, she likes to play hostess. Play is the word for this, a make-believe intimacy.

Swapping bodies like trading cards, borrowing her legs, her arms, her sex. I wonder what she sees when she looks up at me, the tape from rehearsal still across my chest. These days when I look at myself in the mirror it is a disjointed, mismatched thing. I'm tugging it in different directions with no sense of where I want anything to go. I imagine detaching each part of myself, unscrewing my hands and feet and tearing off my shoulders and back and hips. I'd place each part on the floor, and I'd look in the mirror to see what remains.

We stop talking, and continue onwards into each other's mouths. I feel each of her teeth with my tongue. I would escape into her, if I could, and

she says the same, our mouths merging into one.

After, she's flicking through her phone, showing me photo albums, vision boards. Petite, pale, perfect girls smile up at us from the screen. I ask if she plans to grow out her hair. Someday, she promises, and her brightness falters. Someday.

She walks me to the bus stop, leaving the wig behind, her face and short hair now hidden under a hoodie. On the bus, I look back at her through the rain-streaked window, and I press red, erasing her.

* * *

I always vomit before a performance. Expulsion of all imperfection, with the added bonus of making my stomach that much flatter. Even as a child I understood the value of this cleansing ritual, seven years old and sneaking my mother's perfume into my bag before a show, desperate to disguise the scent.

Now, opening night, I can't manage it. Two fingers down my throat in the performance hall toilet, I've even chugged some emergency saltwater, but still nothing. I want to claw away at my skin, squeeze and shake the disloyal organ, but instead I stand up and exit the stall, hearing someone else's success hit the toilet water as I leave.

I watch as our makeup artist works around me, countless brushes and palettes piling up on the vanity, slowly disfiguring the image I know of myself. I was expecting something more dramatic, something like a drag king, harsh lines, all angry contour, a fake beard. But instead the artist softens my features, drawing out the hidden angles, rearranging where my cheeks sit, where my jaw begins, where my eyebrows land. The face in the mirror is real, a physical thing, in a way it's never been before.

Ten-minute call, and I'm still sitting at the vanity. I can't stop looking at my reflection, turning my head left and right and back again, trying to commit the image to memory. You appear next to me, meeting my eye in the mirror. Something about my expression takes you out of show-mode, and a wondering look crosses your brow, some puzzle you can't quite figure out. You brush the moment aside, touching my shoulder, telling me yet again how perfect I'll be. Your words eat at the place where you've touched me. I imagine little dots of mold spreading out from behind your

fingers, dark and nauseating.

Five-minute call. You stand with me in the wings, hidden by the curtains, giving final advice to the dancers around us. We can hear the murmuring of the audience, words blurred, like the rushing of rain. You whisper something in my ear, but I move away from you before I can hear it, certain you are close enough to smell the hotel vomit on my mouth, to find a strand of synthetic hair on my face, to see the place where the red button has stained my fingertips, my palms, the soles of my feet.

The music begins, and the Archers rush onto the stage, tumbling forward. You begin counting under your breath, as if even now you have command over us. I see the Archer's bodies meld into one another, one mass of flesh, a great ring around the stage. If I peer into it I can see the hands I have collected from hotels, the sex I've borrowed, the shoulders I have cast as my own.

I hear my cue. I enter, my feet barely touching the floor. One and two and three and four. I stand alone, center-stage, my chest flat, shoulders taut, and I begin to sob. So unsaintly, my contorted face, my ruined makeup. I dance, and a thousand images are imposed onto my spinning figure. I conjure up those non-existent faces and I take them on, turning the dance into my own world, fracturing it and rearranging it until everyone can see me, see Sébastien, his perfect image.

In the final steps I push myself forward, stretching my arms up, up, drawn fully upwards until I am forced en pointe. Now the arrows will pierce me, now my beatification complete. Though it is not arrows but your gaze I feel pushing against my skin, and I catch your eye from behind the curtain. No one else has noticed my unscripted expression, the audience is caught under my trance. But through my tears I can see I have revealed myself to you, your shaken figure hidden in the wings, witnessing my confessing body, pierced and clubbed and holy.

* * *

The rain stops in time with the show, the sky pulled closed with the curtains. As the applause dies away a new silence is revealed, and I can hear the world again.

Outside, we stand side by side, and you won't look at me. I feel almost

nothing, now that it's over. Part of me hopes it is a sign that I have left him behind, left Sébastien crumpled on the stage floor, forgotten. But there is something new nestled within me now, a tape holding something together.

You wave as the others depart, a tight smile stretched across your face. Once we are sure they are gone, I face you, and your eyes search me. One and two and three and four. I ask you, Emperor, am I to die? Sébastien, I will love you, I will slit your throat. I have seen God, Emperor, I cannot go back now. Sébastien, I know, Sébastien, goodbye.

Elizabeth Salusbury

MARBLE MEN AND MAIDENS OVERWROUGHT

A slice of light whacks through my open curtains.

I let out a crumbly moan and rub my eyes. We went on a rampage last night, George, Soph and I. That much I know, thanks to my dry tongue flopping in my mouth like a slice of pastrami.

Memories are loading in my head, like tabs on a laptop. George's coursemate's party, our escape, weaving in and out of the line of free clubs on West Street, then the 15-minute run to the gay club that stays open until 6am. Some homophobe was being nasty and everyone got involved — oh my God, and then George flew into the mix and got hit by a misfired punch!

Then we got kicked out, skipped home, and the last thing I remember is this stunning *tableau vivant*: Soph perched on the bench warbling random nonsense as she stuffed kebab into her mouth, that guy George had found in the club rolling a cig with a look of disdain on his face, and me cry-laughing at George pissing on a tree stump in the park. This made George laugh, so that her piss came out in little rhythmic spurts perfectly in sync with her cackles, which made me laugh harder.

I start giggling again and use this energy to roll out from my sweaty bed sheets, propelling the top of my body onto the floor with a flump. I use my forearms to drag the rest of my body out, like a soldier in the trenches. Then I crawl through my doorway, across the corridor, and knock on George's door.

'Coooooooooooooooooooo bab,' I call, in an imitation of George's Brummie accent. A gargled 'yehss' and a manly grunt come from behind the door.

'You're not shagging, are you?' I croon.

'Nooo, come innnn sweet cheeks.'

I pull on the door handle from below, and crawl into the room. I bat their feet off the end of the bed and pull myself onto it. The guy looks dazed, pulling the duvet up to cover his bare nips. He's not bad looking — buzzcut, Roman nose, good chin. I grab George's guitar, which is leaning under a print of Amy Winehouse (her God), and settle onto the edge of the bed. George raises one of her dark eyebrows at me in an exaggerated 'go on, then' gesture. Her eyes are bright, mascara prints circling them like pressed petals, and her cheekbone is a bit purply.

'Woah George, you have actual battle wounds!' I gasp. I inspect it close up: lilac is expanding from a darker centre, like a pansy.

'I know, thank God my nan is coming up next weekend and not this one.' She gingerly touches the bruise, wincing.

'Well, I can make it all better with one simple song.' I return to my position and my hands begin to strum at the strings randomly and vigorously. 'I'm on my wayyyy, dri-ving AT nine-ty DOWN thooooose country lanes —'

George splutters, and the guy groans, his palms on his temples. The Irish bar, Murphy's, has the same playlist of carefully selected songs every night: Macklemore, Queen, Pitbull. But Ed Sheeran's 'Castle on the Hill' is number one. No other club we've been to plays it, let alone on repeat. We are sick of it — and, yet, every time it plays, our mouths bellow and our feet stomp on the sticky floor, along with everyone else squashed into that room.

'How did we even end up at Murphy's last night?' George squints at me.

'Do you not remember? We ran there before the party ended — everyone there was talking about their courses and blahblahblah.' For once, we'd gone to something with other people, and ended up just us three as usual.

'Ohhhh, and *then* Woody's! You didn't bring anyone home last night, bab?' George lets her eyebrow soar up to her forehead in mock concern.

'Nahhhh, I think I kissed a few people but nothing more than an innocent smooch.' I pucker my lips up, roll my eyes back in my head, and crawl towards her. She bats me away, giggling. The guy in her bed is just sitting with his hands on his lap, smiling — he seems to have accepted that this will be a communal morning and not a shagging one. If he acts

like he likes George's housemate, maybe she'll go on a date with him. That's what most of the guys she brings home hope for.

We bid him farewell and he slings a little smile back at George as he leaves. Poor fella. He really thinks he's found his next girlfriend, despite meeting her in a club. But, he thinks, *this girl is different*. She dances with her fingers splayed out like she is casting a spell, long platinum hair shimmying around her tiny shoulders. Her eyes are closed, witchy black eyeliner inking itself across her face and, in the blue, red, green lights of the club, her many tattoos glow, inscribed enchantments that draw men towards her. When we dance, I feel like a witch too, in a magic circle marked out by the salt from our sweat glinting on the vinyl floor. Or we are elves, snickering gleefully as we befriend strangers and bring them into our group. Sometimes we are even monsters — tongues out, teeth gnashing, eyes wide, because we have decided that we want to upset, to scare, to surprise.

A straggled mess of pink hair and pyjamas appears, groaning like our noisy boiler. Soph flings herself face down on the cracked leather sofa that takes up most of our living room. There is a muffled 'Helppppp'.

She always feels the worst after a night out — once, she accidentally projectile-vomited onto my face whilst running to the bathroom. Soph is a Chemistry student who looks like an artist in her red floaty skirts and second-hand shirts. She is a sexy pink-haired Christian who twerks at the club and is waiting for marriage. She never judges us for our slutty escapades and chaotic emotions, but maybe sometimes she puts in a prayer or two for us, which could be helpful if she turns out to be correct about the whole thing.

Soph pours tea into three mugs to take with us. Breathing in the sunny April day, we amble to the hill, our go-to spot, in an assortment of mismatched flip flops and slippers. On the corner of the street that lifts towards the hill, we buy chips doused in vinegar. Soph and I munch quietly as we all meander up the steep street of terraced houses. The incline feels the same as when you're steadily chugging up a slope on a rollercoaster, with only the tracks ahead: the only view is the rising road and the blue sky.

'It always reminds me of the seaside...'

'I guess the sea kinda drops down in the same way?'

'It also smells like it. A bit salty, I dunno.'

'That's the chips, you wally.'

We reach the top. The low buildings in this city always allow for the sky to make up a big part of our day, but here, the blue lays itself out for us like a meal to devour. We clamber onto a boulder that perches atop one of the big grassy mounds. There is a green space below where dogs are scampering around, before the hill falls down into trees and the river that sneaks about between them. The view straight ahead is dappled with little red-brick houses, and punctuated by three tower blocks that rise up in the middle. Trees creep between and around the red in every direction, cushioning the hard edges. Resting on top are vast green hills, and on top of that doze the heather-sewn peaks.

We spend hours there. Time slows down on Sundays. This slowness, induced by being physically unwell, makes everything vibrant. The tea tastes intensely leafy and every thought and emotion can be investigated and felt more deeply, the brain idle enough to linger over each one.

We discuss George's man from last night.

'The most interesting thing about him was that he tasted, like, vinegary.'

Soph grabs her knee and leans towards her suddenly, pink locks of hair jostling like cherry blossoms on a wind-shaken bough.

'LIKE ZESTY!' Zesty is the £4 white wine we pre with.

'Oh my God, it actually was.'

We are all cackling, heads thrown into the blue overhead. He is clearly not *the one* and our triangle remains. Soon, we are hypothesising about at what point we'll actually find love; none of us have been in a relationship but we all yearn for it, and yet know that we don't really want it yet.

Soph re-enacts the fight. She nearly falls off the boulder when she imitates George flying into the brawl 'like a sparrow on crack.' As a result of this mockery, George jumps off the boulder and roly-polies down to the green space below, shouting.

'Let me LIVEEEE!'

She turns like a kebab spit set free from the cooking station, hands pinned together over her head, yelping and laughing as she bumps her way down. When she reaches the bottom, she stumbles up and, smiling broadly, holds her hands up like a gymnast. She is wearing a crop top that reaches her belly button but, when she raises her arms, I can see her

ribs poking behind her taut skin. Like the tip of a finger pressed against a sheet of cling film, her bone is pushing against the top layer of her, threatening to rip through. We are skeletons before we are people.

The stale taste in my mouth is seeping back with no more tea to wash it away, and my eyes feel gritty.

‘Let’s go to the soop?’ Soph suggests.

Our use of abbreviations have reached an unprecedented level of absurdity. What’s the point of the word ‘supermarket’ when you can just say ‘soop’? So long as people know your intentions, it’s surprising how little you need words that make sense.

The white overhead lights of the big Tesco slate down in a cold rain. The aisles are laid out in endless parallel lines, like a broken computer screen. We all go our different ways to get out of there quicker, George stumbling towards the teacakes and Soph aiming straight for the soft drinks section. I need dinner, so I make my way to the refrigerated bit. I am greeted by the fishfingers. Soft white flesh carved into little sticks and breadcrumbed.

A throat clears next to me, making me jump. A little elderly man stands below me. On the dome of his head, white wispy hair trails around and through mauve blotches and dark brown sunspots. He is craning up at me, and his face is coated with long yellowed skin sagging over the bones, like clothes stretched too big for the life contained inside. The rims of his eyes are bright red, making them look like they’ve been turned inside out, the way that kids used to do in primary school. His eyeballs stand back from them, as if fearful, so that the rims hang forward sloppily.

He is holding out a red rectangular object. His fingers twist and curve at unexpected places, as if he has spent the past half century working a tricky and unwieldy machine.

‘I have this every other day for dinner. It’s great.’ His voice is croaky, like it is hitting differently shaped rocks on its way up his throat, and it takes me a few seconds to figure out what he’s said. I look more closely at the object. ‘*Sweet-and-Sour Chicken*’ reads a thick yellow font.

‘Oh, ok.’ He continues staring at me. The rims of his eyes really are shockingly red, and glossy, too, as if drops of blood have been smeared around them.

‘You were looking at them,’ his voice quivers insistently. I realise that I

have indeed been staring at the shelves covered with boxes of sweet-and-sour chicken. He lowers his head — I've disappointed him. I try to snap back to my normal, social self.

'Ah, yeah, I've never tried it before, I should give it a go!' I chirp, beaming at him, overcompensating. He smiles back, thin lips cracking into his lined cheeks like a crinkled map that's been unfolded and refolded over and over again. Encouraged, he continues:

'Give it a go, it's very good. Lots of chicken inside as well — they're generous with it, and they not always are, are they?'

I take the box. Satisfied, he turns away, hobbling down the aisle to continue his pilgrimage of unveiling Tesco treasures. *How sweet*, I think — *what a lovely man; no one talks to each other anymore*. And yet I am hit by a wave of nausea; I pay for the chicken and run outside, breathing slowly into the blue.

The girls find me outside leaning against the glass storefront.

'Girls, that was so weird in there. I saw —' I pause, gulping in more air.

'Someone we know?' Soph offers.

'No, there was this little old man who handed me this sweet-and-sour chicken.' The girls begin to giggle.

'No, I swear! I'm not joking! He had these really bloody eyes, it really freaked me out. It felt like some kind of omen or something.' I am laughing too now, recognising how dumb it all is now that my thoughts have been exposed to these two smiling faces in the open air. The girls link an arm each and we stride back to the house, both of them shouting possibilities of who the man could have been.

'Your future sugar daddy? With the job market we're entering, I would totally go there.'

We relax in the living room once we are home, but my hangover continues to get worse. My insides grate against me; I have a scraping headache and my stomach is engaging in amateur gymnastics. I slope off to my bedroom to lie down, listening to their muffled voices chatting in the living room until the sky spreads out like squashed blackberries. Then I hear the door latch click shut and footsteps tapping away; Soph is heading to church, to be reminded of her higher purpose. I try but fail to imagine her sitting in

the church, as I've never been inside it. Her Christianity and my atheism are thick black pens that mark us out as two distinct people.

I don't eat the chicken that night or any. Whenever I take out peas or ice cream, I spot that slither of red at the bottom of the freezer drawer and feel a pulse of guilt. But then I think of the red bloody rims of his eyes. One time, I get as far as taking it out of the freezer and removing it from its red cardboard sleeve. Inside, white flesh chunks are suspended in a pinky-red liquid which, even when frozen into an undefinable mass, looks watery and thin.

What kind of sicko am I? A poor, lonely old man, desperate to have a social interaction, and I am revolted by him. But I soon forget about it, always buying enough freezer food to cover it.

* * *

It is still there on my last evening in the house. Soph and George's mums have both been and picked them up today, but mine can't come until tomorrow. We've spent the past couple of days cleaning and packing and now the house is spotless. The ghostly orange patch on the carpet, from when George once dropped a full bowl of soup, was scoured at length with industrial-strength carpet cleaner, and eventually disappeared. The clumps of dust under the sofa and behind the fridge have been removed, traces of our DNA collected together in the Hoover.

George is back in Birmingham to work in whatever job she can get and Soph is sorted with her big-girl corp job waiting for her in London. I'll go home and apply to anything and everything. Forty-five years of work ahead. Seeing the girls will become less frequent and nothing will be spoken about while it is happening, only after. We'll mature, we won't abbreviate our words, we'll get into relationships, we'll lean on cheap thrills less. We'll be content.

I leave my freezer drawer until the end to clear out. I take out the only thing left: the ready meal. I stare at the chicken. It was once an egg, doomed to become a chick that would be pulverised after a few weeks, the life squashed out of it. Mashed up, then sent to another factory, packaged with some thin tomato sauce, frozen so that the sauce and

the chicken coagulated into one crystal block of red and grey, delivered to some distribution place in a freezer, driven across the country to the supermarket in another freezer. Its frozen afterlife has probably exceeded its actual lifespan.

We've already put the rubbish out, so I take the box outside to chuck it — but the June night is warm and soft, and I realise I haven't left the house all day. I walk up night-swamped avenues of twisting arthritic trees, until I am at the top of the hill. Most of the black is strung up with dotted fairy lights shining from bedroom windows and headlights like fireflies dashing between them. But, over to the left, there is more of a wild, foresty area, and at night it is devoid of the shapes that tinkle through the rest of it. It adds to Soph's theory about the oceanic atmosphere of the place, its smooth absence like a huge swoop of black sea.

The box is still in my hand. It is defrosting, making my fingers soft with wet, cooling my skin. Perhaps the chicken is beginning to move again, swimming in the tomato that it is no longer bound to. Like the glossy red pools that the old man's eyes were swimming in.

I close my eyes. Nothing changes. The black behind them is the same as that in front of me.

Yi Li

FRANK'S FLIGHT

Part 1

Frank hadn't always been called Frank — it was just an English name he adopted after moving to Shanghai, but he never truly felt like it was him.

After only a year of work, he had decided to leave. It happened to be the hottest day of 2014 in Shanghai, with the city burning at 40.2°C. Back then, it was a friend's casual remark — 'You're so avant-garde; Shanghai is definitely the place for you' — that had sent him here without hesitation. Yet now, he was leaving, disheartened. To Frank, Shanghai felt too modern, sometimes excessively so. Its people seemed to be imitating futuristic robots, mimicking their efficiency and directness, but also adopting their coldness.

Frank's university days couldn't have been more different. He had joined the drama club as soon as he enrolled, where he made several friends who became deeply important to him. Together, they rehearsed plays, went on trips, and filled their days with warmth and noise, leaving no room for loneliness. The plays Frank performed in had even won multiple awards at student theater festivals, earning him campus fame. Back then, at least, the people he met were genuine, and the memories were joyful.

But everything changed once he started working. Frank discovered that while colleagues could engage in animated small talk, their expressions would stiffen after three sentences, and their smiles faded quickly as they left. Inviting them out on weekends was futile. Gradually, Frank realized that no one around him spoke the truth anymore — only pleasantries or what the bosses wanted to hear. Frank tried to stay authentic, but it only made him more out of place. In Shanghai, he couldn't find anything like the drama club, where he had once felt such deep connections.

Many late nights, as Frank lay in bed, memories from the past would

resurface. But as soon as they crossed the line of graduation, his image transformed into that of a comet drifting alone through the darkness of space. Passing countless stars, dim and bright, red giants and white dwarfs, he never managed to form a connection with any of them.

One sunny weekend, Frank lay alone in his 27th-floor rented flat, staring blankly at the clouds outside the window. One by one, they floated silently past — no trace of where they'd come from, no sign of where they were heading. Suddenly, a chilling thought struck him: *If I were to drop dead right now, it might take ages before anyone even noticed.* The coldness of this realization lingered in his heart for a long time.

Not long after, Frank resigned. No one tried to stop him.

Just as no one had welcomed him when he arrived, no one cared when he left. Society marched on relentlessly, and his personal feelings were far too insignificant to matter.

By the time Frank had boarded the coach, there weren't many seats left. The windows were all shut, and the air inside felt stale and unpleasant. Even though Frank did his best to maneuver sideways through the narrow aisle, he couldn't avoid stepping on someone's foot or bumping into a passenger standing to stow their luggage.

'Sorry, sorry...' he apologized mechanically as he squeezed through. Fortunately, there were still two empty seats in the corner of the last row. He quickly claimed the window seat.

The coach's final destination was Línshuǐ, a scenic city in Zhejiang Province, two hours from Shanghai. Frank's sister lived there. Before heading to Beijing for work, he wanted to visit her — and hopefully use the time to soothe his weary heart and reconnect with his old self.

The coach is about to depart. Surely no one else will board now, Frank thought, settling into his seat. He scanned the cabin, which was filled with a dense crowd of heads. Most of the passengers were scruffy migrant workers or rural folk returning to the outskirts, speaking in loud, animated voices. It sounded less like conversations with those beside them and more like they were shouting across several rows. Frank hadn't witnessed such lively, unrestrained chatter in a long time.

At that moment, everyone was seated, and although the door remained open, the driver had already started the engine. It seemed unlikely that

more passengers would board. Frank hoped the seat beside him would stay empty for the entire journey.

After holding out for a while, Frank couldn't ignore the unpleasant smell inside the coach. He could distinguish the odors — some from sweat, others from exhaled breath, heavier than air; some bitter, some sour. In the row ahead, two passengers were chatting enthusiastically. Faint traces of cigarette smoke lingered in the air, borne from their breath. Frank couldn't help but picture microscopic nicotine particles and half-digested food particles floating in the air, slipping into his nose.

Finally, he gave in and cracked the window open, just enough to let in a sliver of fresh air without drawing complaints about letting the air conditioning escape.

Just as Frank opened the window, someone sat down beside him. Judging by the weight pressing into the seat, Frank guessed it was a man. Though curious, he didn't dare glance over immediately, instead turning his head to look out the window.

At that moment, the door shut, and the coach pulled away.

Leaving Shanghai South Station, the coach crawled through the bustling city, inching along for more than half an hour before finally ascending the elevated highway and heading toward the city's outskirts. Watching the buildings outside rush past in reverse, Frank thought about how he had once walked among them, uneasy and uncertain. Now, he felt only relief at leaving.

If negative emotions could turn people into monsters, Frank mused, then I must be a 'Dark Cloud Monster'. Most days in Shanghai, he had felt as if a dark cloud loomed overhead. The thought of this comical image made Frank chuckle, and for a moment, his mood lightened.

The coach cruised steadily along the elevated highway. Most passengers were dozing with their eyes closed, while the rest were glued to their phones. Frank glanced at the man beside him. He wasn't sleeping — instead, he held an unfamiliar electronic device, reading intently. That quiet focus and the novelty of the gadget piqued Frank's curiosity.

Adjusting his position, Frank leaned back against the window, pretending to focus straight ahead. In truth, he was using his peripheral vision to steal glances at the man. The man's outfit caught his attention: understated yet undeniably refined. The gray sweatpants with a small,

embroidered deer on the thigh, comfortable and well made. His polo shirt, bearing a distinctive logo of a man on horseback swinging a mallet, exuded a casual elegance.

He must work out regularly, Frank thought.

Even through the loose-fitting sweatpants, the contours of his thighs were impossible to miss — long, strong, and perfectly proportioned. They seized Frank's attention like a warning signal, constantly teasing his maddening urge to press or squeeze them. Giving in would send him soaring with joy but also tumbling into despair. Naturally, Frank's gaze kept straying to the subtle curve at the crotch — an even more dangerous trigger. He knew too well that he couldn't act on it. They were strangers, nothing more.

His attention shifted to the man's right hand, which held the device. Frank loved reading too, but he had never seen a gadget like this before. Narrowing his eyes, he tried to make out the small silver letters at the bottom of the screen: *Kindle*. Committing the name to memory, Frank decided he would search for it later.

While the man read, Frank confined himself to covertly observing from the neck down, avoiding any eye contact. But when the man closed his eyes to rest, Frank allowed himself a more direct look at his profile.

The man's nose was tall and straight, the tip full and slightly upturned, giving him a relaxed, approachable vibe that matched his overall warm aura. His side profile was sharp yet natural, with clean lines extending from his ears to his neck. At that moment, sunlight filtered softly through the opposite window, tracing a faint glow around the man. From Frank's perspective, the light etched a delicate halo along his silhouette, lending him a quiet, serene allure.

Although Frank had stolen several glances, he still couldn't piece together a complete image of the man. But that didn't stop him from gradually developing a fondness for him. At the very least, he seemed tasteful, and was able to stay immersed in a book in such an environment — anyone who loved books couldn't be that bad.

Soon, the man shifted his Kindle to his left hand, letting his right rest naturally on his thigh. As the coach rounded a bend, sunlight swept gracefully across, landing perfectly on the man's right hand. Frank wished deeply that he had the rightful claim to take that hand and gently write

his name in its palm.

For a moment, a subtle intimacy sprouted in Frank's chest, spreading like vines throughout the runaway coach. He wanted to move closer — just a little closer.

Frank placed his hands at his sides, allowing the coach's gentle swaying to occasionally brush the back of his hand against the hem of the man's shirt. It was a fleeting connection, a kind of solace in longing for something unattainable.

On any other day, Frank would have kept his hands firmly clasped on his lap or crossed over his chest, avoiding all physical contact with others. But for Frank, being drawn to someone meant an irresistible urge to touch, to be near them. Even if they parted ways at the journey's end, for those brief moments, there had been a connection. Without exception, beautiful men always captivated Frank.

Outside the window, vast stretches of wilderness began to appear, the air carrying hints of earth and wild grass. Inside, the coach moved steadily, and was exceptionally quiet. The only sound was the low, rhythmic hum of the engine, reverberating gently. In this stillness, Frank felt the weight of his earlier unease begin to lift.

A chubby little face surfaced in Frank's mind — it was his sister's one-year-old son. He hadn't seen the boy in six months. How much had he grown? Could he walk yet? The thought brought a faint smile to his face.

Just as Frank was losing himself in thought, a message alert brought him back to reality. It was from Sister.

'Let me know when you're almost there, and I'll come pick you up.'

Those few simple words touched Frank deeply. *How nice*, he thought, *it feels good to know someone cares*. As if wanting to prolong that warmth, Frank read the message again before replying with a simple, 'Got it.'

For the rest of the journey, Frank kept a close eye on every stop. Finally, when the coach crossed the Qingshān Lake Bridge, he pulled out his phone and texted Sister: 'Sis, I'll be there in twenty minutes. You should probably start getting ready.'

Sister replied with a single word. 'Okay.'

Just one word, but Frank read it over and over. He began picturing the scene waiting for him — Sister would pick him up at the station and take

him home. When they opened the door, his little nephew would likely be sprawled on the sofa, playing as usual. Once he noticed there was a guest, he'd quickly whip his head around to see who it was. At that point, Frank would rush over, scoop him up, toss him high into the air, and catch him again. Each time, the boy would burst into peals of laughter.

Before long, the coach pulled into the terminal. The remaining passengers began to wake up one by one. Frank took a final glance at the man beside him, feeling a pang of regret.

After putting away his Kindle, the man pulled out his phone, and began tapping away, seemingly arranging a ride. Frank continued to watch him in silence. At one point, amidst the array of apps on the man's phone, a familiar blue app icon caught his eye. Frank's heart skipped a beat, and his breath nearly stopped. A sudden, overwhelming urge rose within him: he wanted to speak to the man, to tell him that they were the same, to ask if they could get to know each other. But as the man stood up and left, Frank remained frozen in his seat, unable to act.

Frank watched the man's retreating figure until it disappeared, and the dark cloud over his head began to rain.

After getting off the coach, Frank's eyes darted through the crowd, searching. Finally, near the exit, he spotted the man standing by the roadside, alternating between checking his phone and scanning the passing cars. Frank's heart burned with indecision. He wanted to approach him — just one last chance. But by then, Sister had also seen him, and was waving at him. Frank couldn't linger any longer. Pretending to glance back at the station, he stole one last look at the man before running toward Sister.

On his way to her, Frank felt a brief surge of excitement and joy. But as soon as he reached her and saw her expressionless face, an invisible wall seemed to rise between them. All his emotions were left outside, and their interaction was reduced to the most basic exchange of words.

'Get in,' Sister said flatly.

'Okay.'

No hugs, no pleasantries — just like it had always been, since they were kids.

Frank knew deep down that he loved his family dearly, and that that, of course, included Sister. But he also knew that their relationship had been strained from the beginning. Frank was fire; Sister was ice. Though

she was four years older, whenever they argued, it was always Frank, the younger one, who melted into water — yielding, compromising, and extinguishing Sister's inexplicable anger and stubbornness.

The ride home was nearly silent. Sister rode her yellow electric scooter, while Frank sat cautiously on the back seat, careful not to shift too much. Even when she braked suddenly, Frank would instinctively steady himself to avoid bumping into her.

At the third intersection, Sister stopped at a red light. A Tesla slowly rolled up beside them, preparing to turn. Frank turned his head for a brief look — and froze. Sitting in the back seat was the man from the coach. Frank's breath hitched.

But the Tesla didn't linger. It turned right in front of them, merging onto a side street. The light turned green, and Sister restarted the scooter, continuing straight ahead.

Frank turned his head, watching the Tesla disappear into the distance. Quietly, he whispered: 'Goodbye, Stranger.'

Yingxin Miao

HONG FU FLEES AT NIGHT

This piece is an extract from the short story *Hong Fu Flees at Night*, which follows a factory worker from rural China who is drawn to her neighbour Zhao, only to find herself caught in a web of desire and violence. One night, she makes the choice to run.

The factory lights were stark white, casting every vein, every age spot, every fleck of dandruff into sharp relief. The cuffs of her pale-yellow uniform bore the stains of that afternoon's pickled vegetable soup.

Red line connected: in the murky drainage ditch by the wet market back home, streaks of crimson twisted and swayed, brushing past rotting cabbage leaves like ribbons caught in the wind. A vendor was slaughtering a goose by the water's edge, its blood spurting from its slit throat, curling into the current. Green line connected: the tenement blocks lay engulfed by creeping ivy, their walls swallowed in green. Only the windows stood bare, gaping voids in the dense overgrowth. Rain hammered against the clotheslines strung outside every window, the sound swelling and rolling through the sea of uniform buildings like an echoing tide.

Red line connected. Green line connected. She gave the panel a shove, sending it back onto the relentless conveyor belt, her hand withdrawing just in time to seize another half-formed circuit board where red and green had yet to merge. Clocked in at nine, clocked out at seven. As soon as the shift ended, a hundred bodies rose in unison, every pair of arms stretching skyward.

The pale-yellow tide split into two: those clocking out surged toward the exit, while the night shift workers flooded in. She moved with the outflow, shrugging off her uniform jacket. Polyester, worn thin at the elbows, forever smelling of machine oil no matter how hard she scrubbed. The factory had no air conditioning; sweat clung to her skin in a sticky

film. She wiped her forehead with the jacket.

By seven, the sky had only just begun to darken, the last traces of sunlight — thick, syrupy purple — inching down like something viscous being poured. The air was stagnant. Even breathing felt like labour. Figures scattered at the factory gates: most heading toward the dormitories, a few pressing forward, toward the main gate. She wasn't staying in the dorms.

The streetlights were a hazy amber ring. Plastered onto the poles were crude, peeling ads: "Gonorrhoea," "Syphilis," "Premature Ejaculation." She turned left into a narrow alleyway, lined on both sides with tightly packed housing. Warm yellow light spilled from the windows, illuminating racks of drying laundry — shirts, trousers, undergarments, a jumble of colour. She kept walking, almost reaching the alley's end before slipping into a doorway on the right.

The first-floor doors were always open — her landlord's family of six lived there. No matter how late she came back, the sound of their card games would still be going, their coarse laughter scraping against the walls. It was a sound so rough she could almost feel the grit beneath her fingertips. In summer, power cuts always rolled through the districts. Then she would climb the stairs in darkness, one hand brushing the wall, the same coarse grain beneath her touch. The second floor housed two men. The third floor — that was where she lived.

The stairwell had no lightbulbs, but the glow from the window was enough. Zhao's body was bent over a basin, her hair submerged in water. The communal sink was too low to fit their heads beneath; the showerhead inside the stall was always broken. So, each time they washed their hair, they would fill a basin with hot water and place it on a low stool. They sat on another stool and then bent forward. Zhao's hair was thick and abundant, spreading out to fill the entire red basin, saturating it with its dark weight.

"Off work?" Zhao's voice was muffled. She cupped a palmful of water and poured it down the back of her skull.

"Yeah." She answered.

Unlike her, Zhao had lived here for years. It was only six months ago that a coworker had brought her in. She and the coworker shared this tiny rented room, its single bed. That coworker had been an ambitious one, always carrying a notebook. Once, after they'd grown close enough,

she was given permission to flip through its pages. Each one meticulously recorded daily expenses, with lyrics, motivational quotes, and English vocabulary words scrawled in the margins. Written on the inside cover, in neat, determined handwriting, was a single line: "Betray fate, and fate will betray you." That coworker had left not long after, landing a clerical job at another factory and then moving out of the tenement entirely. The last time they met, she had been urged to leave the assembly line. "No future in this."

But she had stayed. Same job, same cramped room. Rent was now entirely on her.

"Need help?" she asked Zhao.

"You should rest," Zhao replied, scooping another handful of water and letting it trickle through the thick black hair.

When she had first moved in, she hadn't yet learned the erratic nature of the shower. She had lathered her hair full of shampoo, only to find that no water came out. The old knob squeaked; she turned it left, then right — still nothing. Suds streamed into her eyes, burning them shut. Her coworker wasn't home — she had had no choice but to shout, loudly enough that the landlord's wife might hear from downstairs.

"You're the new girl, right?" A woman's voice had carried easily through the thin door. "I'll bring you some water. Dry yourself off first, then come out to rinse your hair."

This was how she met Zhao.

Zhao brought over a kettle of hot water from her room and mixed it with the half basin of cool. Following Zhao's instructions, she sat on the low stool and bent over the basin, dunking her soapy hair into the water, until she felt a hand lifting the weight of her skull.

"I used to work in a salon," Zhao had said.

The accent had been thick, but she couldn't quite place it. Her coworkers were better at it — they could pinpoint a person's province just by a single phrase, a hometown rooted in their tongue.

Zhao's fingers massaged her scalp firmly, methodically. The sound was loud — *shua la, shua la*, like the rasp of loofah on skin, or the crackling press of stalks beneath her soles; friction rolling in waves, intimate, as if seeping into her skull. Zhao pressed her thumbs against the sides of her skull, kneading upwards, inch by inch, until her hands met at the crown

of her head. The water rippled with each movement, brushing against her ears with a ticklish sweep.

“Feels different when someone else washes it, doesn’t it? Gets the veins in your head opening.”

Her head was bowed, arms curled inward, vision filled only with her own chest. The blood rushing downward made her cheeks burn. Zhao’s thumbs pressed into her temples, circling, each motion coaxing her eyes shut involuntarily. In the darkness behind her lids, she seemed to see it: her vessels gently pried open; the blood, long dammed, finally surging upward. A crimson dot, a scarlet thread, an ocean of red.

Zhao didn’t work during the day. Sometimes she played cards at the landlord’s house, but more often, she sat downstairs, chatting with the others who loitered there. When Zhao had learned where she worked, she had nodded knowingly. “I worked there once. The boss isn’t bad. At least he pays on time.”

“Where do you work now?” she had asked.

Zhao smiled, glancing down at her phone. “I work nights.”

She did not say where, and the question was never pressed.

Zhao always wore makeup but never removed it properly — dark smudges of eyeliner collected beneath her eyes, merging with the purplish hollows. She looked like she hadn’t slept in years. Her lipstick was heavy, an unyielding shade of red that cut sharply against her pale skin. Her lips were where the eye always landed first. When she grinned, two pointed canines flashed.

She liked talking about her daughter, who was in secondary school back in their county town, doing well in her studies. “Sometimes, she even makes the top of her class.” Zhao looked too young to have a child, but then again, it was difficult to tell.

“I had her when I was fifteen,” Zhao had said once, laughing. “I barely knew anything back then. Got married right away, held a banquet. Stupid decision. Should’ve had a few more years of fun first.”

Zhao’s story didn’t feel unfamiliar. Her deskmate in secondary school had also married at fifteen. She had been asked to be a bridesmaid and had agreed. Many young couples in her hometown weren’t old enough to legally register their marriages: they simply held the banquet first, then signed the paperwork when they came of age.

That day had been bitterly cold. The snow from the past week had hardened into slabs of dirty ice and been shovelled into heaps along the roadside. She had been too young to be of any real help, so she had simply pulled a down jacket over her dress and wandered outside, stomping footprints into the frozen sludge, amidst red paper remnants of firecrackers trampled beyond recognition and pressed deep into the dirt.

From the hilltop, she had looked down at the courtyard, its walls plastered with red papers, though even they looked dull against the grey and white snow. The groom, in a black suit, stood chatting and laughing with guests while people hurried in and out around him. The bride's mother and sisters, also dressed in red, had been carrying things to help. Then, suddenly, they stopped; they sat down on bamboo chairs in a corner, and began to cry.

Crying was expected: a daughter leaving home was meant to be mourned, now that she would belong to another family. But why were they crying already?

It was at that moment that the firecrackers went off, and the sound drowned everything else out.

Red line connected: she woke to find a red stain on her trousers and bedsheet. Her eldest sister said nothing, just crouched in the courtyard and began scrubbing at the fabric with steady strokes — *shua la, shua la*. But it never came clean. For the next seven years, she would sleep on that same sheet, marked by a scarlet blot that never faded. Green line connected: one green train after another pulled into the station. “*To Guangzhou, Zhengzhou, Hangzhou...*” One after another, they came. One after another, they left. Again and again. People, packed like unpopped kernels in a bursting pot, pressed tightly against one another inside the carriages.

Going to the toilet required a report to the supervisor.

“Why do you keep resting?” The supervisor glared at her.

The rubbish bin in the toilet had long since overflowed, used tissues and sanitary pads erupting like a volcanic spill, creeping toward the squat toilet's edge. She squatted down and realised that her period had come — four days late this month. She fished a sanitary pad from her pocket, one she'd bought online with her co-workers. It was cheap, and, when

unwrapped, gave off a certain scent. “That’s just the plastic,” her co-worker had assured her.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket.

“We’re off work. You done yet? Wanna play tonight?”

She replied quickly. “Not off yet. I’ll text you when I’m home.”

The profile picture on her screen was square and uniform, like the windows of a tube apartment, neatly arranged in a row. Behind each tiny square sat an unseen person, their presence revealed only by the glow of their screens. Back in middle school, she used to follow the boys to internet cafés. The boy who would always sit beside her used to rest his hand on her thigh. She thought he was ugly, but let him. Now, gaming no longer required an internet café — just a phone. There was one phone game that she’d started playing not long after it had launched. She played it every night, without fail.

She had met the profile picture in-game. They were a couple now, in the game.

The profile picture asked if she could use a particular female character in the game. The model was sexy, and he thought she was sexy too. That hand, creeping from her knee upward, moved inward. She felt neither pleasure nor disgust — just indifference, the same way she knew never to sit directly on a public toilet seat, or that no one ever paid full price at market stalls. Just another corner of life.

On her way back to the tube apartment, she saw the motorcycle downstairs — the worn-out front bumper, the faded and chipped paint. A machine that looked like a bad omen. She knew who it belonged to.

She had only just moved in back then, working night shifts, with free time during the day to chat idly with the landlord. They were standing at the door, gossiping about the motorcycle’s owner. The landlord had laughed, shaking her head.

“Zhao said that man was her boyfriend? Boyfriend, my arse. He’s a chicken head. But hey, not my business — just don’t bring any trouble back here.”

She hadn’t understood what a “chicken head” was back then. Later, she had learned: it was the man who found clients for prostitutes, the middleman, the pimp. They all called them “chicken heads.”

Laughter and conversation floated from the opposite room — Zhao’s

room. The walls here might as well have been made of paper. Sometimes, she could swear they were speaking right inside her own room. Zhao let out a sharp laugh, then came the rustling of movement, and then, as expected, a knock at her door.

“My boyfriend brought some food from the city centre — restaurant stuff, really good,” Zhao said, holding up a plastic bag filled with takeaway boxes. “You’ve got tomorrow off, right? Let me take you to the city centre for a walk.”

She hesitated before taking the plastic bag. “Alright,” she said.

The food was already cold. A white film of congealed fat coated the chunks of braised pork. She poked at it half-heartedly with her chopsticks, ultimately picking up a piece and put it in her mouth.

The cloying oiliness lingered. She unlocked her phone.

“You logging in?”

A green message bubble popped up almost instantly. “On my way.”

It was a competitive game — two teams, each controlling their characters in battle. She always chose the sweet-looking one. They played with voice chat on, speaking as they fought. Her character bounced on the spot in an idle animation. The conversation next door never ceased. They were speaking in dialect — she didn’t understand a word.

The glow from her phone screen was too harsh; she suddenly snapped. “Did you even see someone come at me? Are you even playing seriously?”

The voices in the next room grew louder. The laughter had disappeared. The words were turning sharp, brittle. Zhao’s voice faded while the pimp’s voice expanded, filling the entire third floor. It was always like this — ever since she’d seen that motorcycle, she’d known it would be like this. On the phone screen, she sent her character charging into the enemy.

She didn’t turn on the light and pulled the blanket over her head, curling up as she continued playing. And then, the room next door fell into sudden silence. A sudden, unnatural silence. Only the distant wail of an ambulance, the shuffle of slippers as someone upstairs moved toward the corridor.

“You still there? Why aren’t you saying anything? I miss you,” the profile picture said. She had stayed on the call with him the whole time, but hadn’t said a word.

She didn’t want to hear his voice anymore, not tonight. But before

she could say a word, a sound came from next door — a sharp, shattering crash. Something had hit the floor. Something had fallen. A thud. A break. A shout. She knew the meaning behind every sound. Connecting to the red line. Connecting to the green line.

She played on, dying again and again. Her character respawned, only to die again. Even the profile picture grew impatient.

“You’re playing like shit tonight.”

She quit the match. “Then don’t play.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

The call disconnected.

The screen went dark; inside the cocoon of her blanket, the world was swallowed by blackness. But she kept listening. And then she realised — she was crying. It was ridiculous.

She threw off the blanket and got out of bed. The takeaway boxes still sat on the table. She pried them open one by one — braised pork, stir-fried chives, spicy beef, each dish coated in a thick layer. She picked up her chopsticks and ate, stuffing herself with the cold, greasy leftovers. Her stomach ached, a dull, persistent pain. She could feel the slow trickle of blood between her legs.

Back on the bed, she pressed her cheek against the pillow, the tear-soaked spot cold against her skin. She pressed harder, feeling the damp chill. The noise ceased, and in the vast, indifferent darkness, she imagined Zhao straighten up, limping as she righted the table, picked up the scattered clothes, and dressed to conceal every mark, just as Zhao had remained silent all night. She imagined her staring at the wordless figure, taking in the mess of that retreating back. She was still crying, but in the cold, something quiet stirred inside her — something almost like cruel satisfaction.

Zhao still showed up the next day, as if nothing had happened.

“What time can you leave?”

For a moment, she didn’t respond — her gaze drifted over Zhao’s skin, searching for any traces of last night. But there was nothing. No marks, no bruises. Nothing left on the surface. She didn’t know why she was looking. She didn’t know why she felt something close to hate.

“I can go now,” she said.

POETRY

Amber Souch

CLIPPED WINGS

At the bottom of rolling hills, a cottage sits. We nest in a leaning shed behind, huddled together, our underbellies warm, the straw slightly damp, taking it in turns to sleep. Until a woman potters down each morning, a basket in the crook of her elbow. Dispersing us with black

wellington boots, she takes the products of our roosting. She mutters about the hole in the door, the moulding slats by the hinges. The draught that trickles in at night: it is only a matter of time. Until what, she will not say, but still, we take heed of the warning. So, whilst Bertha sleeps,

Betty peeks through the peephole on the back of the door. It is not long before they come. Their copper tang sends us wild. I suppose it is our scurrying that draws them closer. But fear makes us raucous and we cluck and we clack until they tear, grinning, through the rotting wood.

The first stands drooling in the middle of our shed. There's another — a black silhouette in the night. We try silence, thinking if they cannot hear us, they might not taste us. But something sets the second one snarling and the silence grows cloying; we erupt in a cacophony of

pleas that splatter across the straw. Betty and Bertha get away. They were both keeping watch and smelt the copper long before we others. But as I hang limp in jagged jaws, I blink and lose Bertha. Betty, I see, is over by the fence. Clipped wings useless in all that barbed wire.

A PEEK BEHIND THE CURTAINS

It is at night we hunt. Tails bushed, stomachs growling as twilight sets in. Ferreting out creatures too small and too slow to deny us. Tonight, a not-too-distant cluck and clack pricks our ears. We grin as we tear the door from its hinges.

I stand in the middle of the coop whilst you circle the doorway, hackles raised. They simply sit, blinking dazedly. Until I hear the murmur of your growl and it forces my own lip back behind my teeth. The coop becomes a flurry of feathers, a cacophony of

squawks. It is over in an instant. Only two escape and, even then, one manages to tangle herself in barbed wire. We lick the copper from each other's noses and pad back into the night. Full bellies have made us drowsy and by the honeysuckle we curl into each

other. I rest my head on that soft spot between your ears and gaze up at a distant cottage. Behind the curtains, in the bottom window, two shadows twist into one. I watch for a moment, blinking dazedly, but as ruddy dawn breaks, I find myself slipping into stillness.

I OFFER MYSELF WITH SALT AND LIME

Salt sits like hoarfrost on your lips. They crack and chafe as tequila spills over the corners. You flinch and purse and pout. I have not

touched you where you yearn to be touched; instead, I draw back. Green eyes twinkling at the pulse in your neck that quickens as lips release their

silent plea. Salt begins flaking, tumbling, down your chin. It is here I taste first. Citrus sharpens my cheekbones. Beneath them, you deflate. But down

on your knees, you pull me close, lips scratch like sandpaper: salt in a sore. Agony. I expire as lime whets my gums. I concave and beneath your limbs,

entwine my own. Pallid skin dripping: your veins thawing mine. Carve me out, I cry — drink me dry. I offer myself willingly, with salt and lime.

Astrid Meyer

PLASTER CAST OF A WOMAN FROM POMPEII

Manchester Museum

'Your body is not inviolable. This is why I am speaking of a second body'
— Daisy Hildyard, *The Second Body*

Amidst sulphuric rock, pin-incised butterflies
And gleaming, red-banded agate, there reclines
A body
Of sand and cement
In the shape of a woman —

'[T]he boundaries between one thing and another collapse'

The reverent hole
That she left
In the ash, her lacuna, was packed
With plaster,
Filling her empty form,
Rendering her
A statue,
An elegy

'[Y]et it is not too much fantasy but too much reality which brings about the
doubled existence'

An enduring monument
To the body's burial vault,

The strange sepulchre
Of the body

‘[T]he words allow the reader to enter a *dark interior space*’

Outside the glass case, I stand
And perceive, through flesh
And blood, this body
Of matter, gently curved — a mollusc’s mantle secreting
Its outer shell —
The indented
Trail of her spine, her final posture

‘These bodies are too physical to be bearable.
How poorly we are made, how insufficient’

Before her body was seized
By lava, writhing, dissolving
Into thin air,
A cavity left
In the ground

IN THE LIKENESS OF A GIRL, KNOWN TO (SOME) VIOLET-STAINED HISTORY

lines for Mary Stuart

A flurry of snow
That rains
From a peerless sky

*The day that shone
the clearest*

For her was darkest night,

*'In my End is my Beginning',
she stitches hurriedly
into brocade drapery*

Was she always this way?
Blackberries ice-cold crushing
Between teeth

*She had in the keyhole-eye
of her mind
a portrait and a pansy-palsied likeness
of him whom she had loved once, dearly*

*Now pallid faced, stained
with violets*

Her too regal timidity turning
Between the impasse
Of sheets, she had lost

Her girlhood temerity, and replaced it with
Resplendent reserve, fleeting breath, a throne built
Upon slaughter, unlettered —

The noon-tide babbles
To her, marked reticently
By melancholy's regalia,
And by another Queen's bitter rivalry, tethered
To the exacting moonshine —

She, that reckless undertaker
Of splendour,
Inflammable keeper
Of silvered secrets, blazing timorously
With an unkempt, ruffled violence
Before another hip-bolstered, stiff-bodied,
Tautly cross-laced woman
And hordes
Of doubleted, breeched men
Whose acid love would corrode her,
And eventually decapitate

"What am I, alas," she asks,

"And what use is my life?"

PSYCHE'S SURMISE: SHE MIGHT FORM YOU

*after 'La Psyché (The Full-length Mirror)' by Eva Gonzalès
and 'Venus and the Lute Player' by Titian*

I pass an arrow to my mother,
that blunted
self-appraising figure, effaced
by the mirror's discontents,
her face softly modelled,
her reflected features left unworked.

Years before, she had taken out
her liver
or some other essential organ,
and with it, created
a daughter —

Or had she, perhaps,
sat with her back
to the mirror, all along?

Called in French *la Psyché*
after her
with those soul-mirror eyes —

Though no eventual gain
or loss will result
from the mirrored image,
from this semblance
of quiet self-appraisal,
contemplative reprisal,

Still, I see the twilight of the day
reflected in her face,
in the half light
of her eyes,
and death's second self, who is either
sleep or night,
trembling up from below,
streaming from her glance —

Still, I see the close of day
in her eyes,
its reluctant departure, the temporary absence,
its brief succumbing
to enfolding night —

Is she, like me, caught in the reveries
of love, my love,
or those of grappling?

Oh, seep into her star-spangled skin,
or out of my own,

Under a waning gibbous moon,
its spare silver drops
of moonshine
the match with which to burn
the house down,
an outset of sorts,
a spark ignition —

The newly lit match, struck
like the shimmer
of a golden-ringed dragonfly
that tremble-lands nearby —

Was it the grate of her bones,
or the damselfly's red eyes, or her,
with her pearl-studded hair
and fine pearl earrings
like those of the one who stands
opposite her, I could sense?

Am I, like her, with my dusk-filled eyes,
and pearls woven through my hair,
caught in the reveries
of love, my love,
or those of grappling?

Dylan Stewart

LOOKING OUT

I escape into the morning sky. Looking out.
A flock in the red, black specks, flying —
they don't think much, no need.
One flies behind by a few beats of the wing —
does he feel guilty maybe or is this just
the way of things.
To know only that one day he will reach warm air —
or not. To know that either way is justice, is fair.
Or, no, to not know of justice either way.
To know only that you are getting warmer.

HELIAN¹

Death is not proud.² Make no mistake.
When they put the Death to your head,³
It was not their own power they fed,
It was not your life that they did take.
And although I loved you dearly,
 And although you are lost to me,⁴
 And although we are not free,

Loss and shame remain.

Beautiful it is to walk through the garden.⁵
And his blue eyes shut upon the stars.
The great gateway is yours to tread
But you will not walk through.

Peace, Helian, do not weep;
Peace, Love is only asleep.⁶

¹ Ernest Young (1916–1944), the author of this poem, was an English poet and schoolteacher who served as a volunteer for the Republican army in the Spanish Civil War. This poem was composed while Young was in Spain, sometime in 1938. It was first published in 1940 in a small Mexican journal of no renown, *Libertad*. It went unnoticed. Young somehow remained both a committed socialist and Catholic for his whole life.

² A copy of John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* was found on his body.

³ Young was present at Gonzalo Queipo de Llano's massacre at Málaga, where 5,000–15,000 civilians were bombed from air and sea, resulting in the deaths of 3,000–5,000.

⁴ Here the sonnet form is lost, broken. This poem marks a transformation, present on the page, of Young's poetry from religious late Romanticism to the distracted modernism that followed him for the remainder of his life.

⁵ This third stanza and the title itself take from Georg Trakl's 1913 poem 'Helian'. Trakl's work was introduced to Young by his close friend, comrade in arms, and fellow poet, Cesare Guana (1914–1937), whose work is currently untranslated.

⁶ This final couplet is plagiarised from the Catholic mystic Richard Crashaw. The original lines read 'Peace, good reader, do not weep; | Peace, the lovers are asleep.'

HOMESICKNESS

At the fall of the World's Desire, the City's final emperor Constantine XI was taken into the sky by two Archangels dressed in purple silks. They wept rosewater as they turned him to marble and hid him for 500 years in the depths of the Earth so that when he awoke he could reclaim what was lost and restore Constantinople.

But on his return he found that everyone thought him mad, and Constantinople was fine. Due to a series of misfortunes, he now finds himself in Headley — working in a pub on slightly above minimum wage. It's not so bad, he tells me: the people here are nice and he gets plenty of free pints and pork scratchings.

As he pours me a drink, I see a sadness in his eye. I don't ask but he tells anyway. He says that one day he would like to visit again, at least go back to Morea, where he grew up. He misses the olive trees, he says, not the olives but the trees. But tickets aren't cheap and he has more pressing worries.

Ellie Grant

THE THROWBACK

A magpie — collecting all manner of things
in scattered woodland — a ring, a potsherd, some sticks,
a foil wrapper for something expired '96.

An urban fox — taking residence in a rabbit hole
or a bargain bin — dressing its home and itself
with old curios — coral, celluloid, ivory, bone.

A goose from a distant city — returning
north — creating a nest from an old, forgotten branch
and learning to sing an old, forgotten song.

An atavism — a flicker on the family tree —
the dog's dewclaw, the sirenian's leg — be-
nipped, be-tailed, be-webbed. A wildflower —

a dandelion in the cobblestones, doing its own
thing — and nobody knows where I come from.

BLOSSOM

Into the nooks.

Into the crannies. Into
the ginnels or snickets, the
weedling alleys. Where
the wind blows, the seeds
spread; the spores will
follow, will follow.

Down the
chimneys, in through vents
and the spalling brickworks
where the mason bees nest.
Into the flowerpots, the soil
under the unturned stones,
and down

the potholed road
where an orchard used to grow.
Where the feral pigeons coo
and the slugs and snails glisten
in the light of the moon. Soon.
Into the crack in the wall. Behind
closed doors. When

the rain pours,
they'll watch from the shadows
how far the apple falls.

CHANGELINGS

*'For he comes, the human child
To the waters and the wild'*

— William Butler Yeats

We are coming.
The woods have ears and we have eaten them.
With curdled milk and the funeral bells.
 With grazed arms and legs, we are coming
 out of bramble ditches and the blackthorn hedge.

We are creeping. Out of the sediment, with the
lucky pennies and the fragments. Clay pipes,
 bottles and porcelain dolls. We are crawling
 up the wishing wells, with fingers whittled down

to stubs. We are sneaking. Disguised as ratlets and
little snakes. Out of cooking pots and cast-
 iron stoves, the burning hearth, the cracks
 in the wall. We are spreading. With the hogweed

in the wheat, with the hoarfrost and fleas. We have
bitten the harvest men in the field, licked
 away the cuckoo spit and the scattered salt,
 the trail of crumbs, the mould in the silo of malt.

We are coming.
Flying out of the bathwater, the hen's broken egg,
with black feathers sewn to our flapping arms.
 In the valley, the cold earth is around our
 feet. And we will not leave at the turn of the sun.

Rhiannon Price

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE PROZAC-ISH

I'm a tranquilliser.
I plant my roots in the pinky folds.
I take hold in the 333rd hour, perhaps.
I lick your split thoughts, conjoined sides of a silver mirror,
splintered smatterings from drunken honeysuckle, desperate consumption.
I balance your infatuations and let you love in colloquial passions.
All you must do is take me,
let me wrap around your tongue,
whisk me away with water
to find my acidic, flesh-bound home.

I teach you how to handle misfortune,
how to slip into my comfortable anaesthesia.
I minimise your presumed injustice;
you'll learn to love peacocks again,
or pick a man to wear lily-white for. It's about time.
What are you waiting for —

You're still a soft young woman.
What you have is not a death sentence, but what if it is?
Who said
you had to go and die alone?

Let me quiet your abyss.
I'll muffle the desperate calls.
You'll thank me for giving you
another eight lives, another eight chances.

Sell me your soul.
There are no other takers.

BABY BLANKIE

It is the first thing I remember
when I long to forget last seen
draped darling over a wooden chair
and touching
the floor from cornered hands and
feet undead

I would stuff it into my mouth
a muslin corner soaking up spit
pink insides
dry and leaving my tongue
protruding from my tastebuds numb

I clung onto it for as long as I could
an intimate metamorphosis and
perhaps it was then at twelve
when it spent time between arms
and then legs
something maladaptive hatched

I nipped at its cotton and relished
in penetration the snap
of fibres the fraying of its
 tender strings
and although young I could feel all of it inside

STRAY DOG

You came to me, child of street hovel from what we left behind,
one ear half lopped over to touch your temple —

and in your temple lived a thousand others,
an involuntary host of life, death, and those seen in-between.

I found them all between the fur I spread far apart with fingertips —
a playground, metamorphosis on hatched graveyards, pus play.

White eggs sat settled on bonded follicle, popped under pressure,
and with them came salt-and-pepper life, the semi-autonomous kind.

I adored your eyes in their milky white, strawberries and cream;
an inbred, manufactured love that coursed through your veins.

That is to do anything, for anyone, born on bassinet wet cardboard,
splatted into life to suckle on gangling nipples, mummy senseless.

I took a comb in my hand and dragged it through that short-haired fur,
guided by your whimpers: you're my broken baby bird, and you strayed from the nest.

Your bones writhed with larvae, ashen flesh stretched in concealment, cherry-dipped.
Is white the colour of decay, and is grey the colour which condemns us?

And with eyes to give me everything, I was inherently frightened of you.
I'm no pretty puppy, but was my birth not enough? You questioned me with silent,
diamond eyes.

And when you succumbed to it all, I found a sickening relief,
as those who look after you now will love you with unbiased, unconditional
fearlessness.

Samantha Graham

OCTOBER, FOR NOW

after 'In October', by Claire Malroux (tr. Marilyn Hacker)

October blazing,
bark arms
 cradling
 their last signs of life
Leaves slowly dropped
to the floor in pools
 of gold

Nature can't help itself —
even death must be
 beautiful, it seems

As the air becomes colder,
 the trees talk of heat —
each one flaunts
a fire in its canopy,
 dressing up its leaves
 in whorls of red
and orange
 as if to mock us,
and that hole in the ozone

I know
that each year brings
 in its bag
 a shorter October
That the borders that paint
time's
 passing
are losing their rigour

The mechanism fails
as human gestures
 unravel

But, for now, this is it —
the trees' last urge at life,
 held here in amber

October, before
 all hues have been spent;
 before October dwindles
right down to the capital O

October,
before October drops to the ground
 and all we have left
 are those pools of gold

HANDS

a ghazal

The scent of jasmine that lives on my grandmother's kind hands
does a turn of the room with each of her movements, dances around her glass of
white wine; hands

wrapped around the stem as we talk, but never staying there — always shifting
into her words, seeking new air, and, every moment or so, landing
on mine: hands

meeting my unscented palms, held for a moment as the evening closes,
wine glass empty and her suitcase haunting the
hallway outside; hands

waving goodbye, me in the doorway as jasmine spreads into the night —
and later, sore eyes and no one else to call on
the landline, hands

tidying the lounge and finding a glint of turquoise metal nestled in the couch —
a tube of her hand cream, left behind. I close the blinds — just me now, and my
new jasmine hands.

ARABESQUE WITH QUESTIONABLE FORM

Let me put on one foot
the weight of two things:
first the body,
torso stacked over
leg,
and second the breath,
held tight in spaces
where the form allows.

Lungs a little tight, I try some warm-up yoga:
reach high, stretch
my body into
a capital I; fold
myself over, a girl in folio,
hands touching
toes.
I try the arabesque again.

The balance is best when you embrace
the bends that come with the body's
attempt to slant left —
lean forward if needed,
swap between first and second position
if it keeps you from swaying
too far from focus.

I'm switching between first and second person:

me,
and the imaginary audience
in front, their gaze
reading each gesture of my hands, the negative space
behind my body.
I spread myself into the room I have created.
I leave caesura.
Gaps.

Tell me:
if I fall,
would I get back up?

Honestly —
watching you
watch me,
I almost catch my own eye.

Tom Pyle

MOMENT

I am moving. We are moving —
four of us, packed
into a silver box and flying
down the A66. Mountains

growing brighter and brighter
in the windscreen, shadows
racing each other across fields
and licking the white lines.

This time they will not catch us.
I carry the route inside me
and feel each shiver in the road
surface. I remember the way

the gravel spits and the strip
of tarmac vanishes. How the sun
stages its daredevil drop
and settlements wink

from high ledges — so near
and sharp that I feel I could
reach into the wind, run a hand
along their rooftops and leave

a seventy-mile-an-hour smear,
rust-coloured on the hillside.

THE STATION

A trumpet explodes
in your ears. It is March,
still cold enough to snap fingers

into claws and crack leaf litter
underfoot. The tone is unmistakeable —
Hugh Masekela

whose glass-fire notes
sprint up and down the scale
as your boots carve

through the night
and two words burn
new horizons before you.

You'd heard them that afternoon
spoken in a library. Numb,
you just went back to work.

Imagine being told someone has died,
seeing the worst confirmed in white
and blue across your screen

then sitting down, plugging out
the world and picking up the album
where you left off.

'Grazing in the Grass' shifts
to 'Mace and Grenades'. Amazing
how a minute can fold into anarchy.

Hugh sings about a train, 'Stimela',
running from Mozambique and Malawi
to the whole hinterland of Southern Africa.

You've heard it fifty times before
but this time find yourself standing
in the cathedral hall of a station.

Giant arches glowing with sunset,
tannoy chords ringing
in the clear air.

The bookshelves melt
into iron rails, shunting the last
memories out into a maze

of terminals. Walking together
to the Half Moon, watching
matches replay in an empty bar,

catching the shadow
of his tall frame in the audience
from the corner of your eye.

Each moment blinks
once, then drops off the face
of the timetable.

The next day, you stand alone
in the flat. Blue skies and white
scraps of cloud circle.

Searching for something to write
and failing, you find your eyes
drawn to a pasted photo.

The same station. Saturated
so heavily that the great
elliptical window burns yellow.

As yellow as the lion cub
on Masekela's album cover —
the one with 'Sharpsville'.

Only recently, you realised
that song is about a massacre.
March 1960. Ninety-one protesters

killed outside a police station. Though
now they think the real number
was closer to a hundred.

*Soon one morning, death comes
a creepin' in the room. And you
feel that Hugh had known it*

as he raises the horn
to his lips again
and describes your sense

of standing on a platform.
The final carriage pulling out
and light fading rapidly.

Scanning and scanning the boards
for some kind of explanation.
O my Lord, what shall I do?

Watching the station arches
slide deeper and deeper
into shadow, until there's only

those glass-fire notes
coming from somewhere
in the darkness.

Telling you,
you better just hush.
Hush. It won't do no good.

STRADA 9 MAI

It's almost May and I imagine I'm walking
down a street. All the houses are mustard

and the paint is cracking. In every window
I see my reflection. Not as I am, but as I was

on a warm evening with a month's wages
and a keycode copied onto an old receipt.

The street is long and whispers out of sight
somewhere past the off-licence where I know

the owner always grins. I can see him now
balanced on a stepladder, planting a bottle

of overproof rum on a distant summit of
kitchenware. I wonder when he first noticed

I'd gone, if he ever did. Whether I could slip
between his spilling fruit and be recognised

again. The moon rising and the city poised.

NOVEL EXTRACTS

Alexandria Mowrey

MATRON SAINTS

SYNOPSIS: *Matron Saints* is a novel following four women in the Florida Panhandle. Spanning two generations, it explores familial tradition set against the backdrop of the interwar period. More importantly, though, it is a story about bridging the gap between personal and shared history.

Chapter 1

Marie was eleven years old the first time she eavesdropped on purpose. It was four o'clock on a Friday during the warmest summer she'd ever known. Pastor Williams had said that while Hell may be hot, nowhere gave it a run for its money like the Florida Panhandle. He reckoned even Satan kept a fan by the bedside table.

Aunt Joyce was in the kitchen, on the phone with her friend Carla, who lived over in Apalachicola. All Marie knew about Apalachicola was that Aunt Joyce would visit for a week every scallop season and come back redder than a tomato and off the drink for at least three days. Three days was the longest she ever went off the drink.

Aunt Joyce also happened to be Marie's favorite, the same as Marie was hers. If it was before noon, Marie would even be allowed one sip of her Bloody Mary. On weekends, she'd even be allowed to try her gin, though that was far less enticing.

Now Joyce Miller was not a small woman, neither in stature nor spirit. Physically, she was quite round, or 'womanly', as she preferred. She'd tell Marie that in primitive civilizations, being well fed was a sign of evolutionary superiority. By primitive civilizations, she'd mean Louisiana (though Mama would immediately shut this down as mean-spirited).

Her short black hair was already peppered with gray, despite only being in her forties, and it framed her face abruptly, accentuating her often exaggerated facial expressions. When she was younger, though, and she certainly wouldn't let you forget it, she had been striking. Her dark eyes, high cheekbones, and thin lips had appeared exotic amidst the backdrop of cotton and peanut fields. Yet now, sitting in the kitchen of their little white cottage, she melted into the scene without protest. Fortunately, where her body had failed to maintain its mystique with age, her wit, her bite, had compensated tenfold.

So there Marie sat, listening on the other side of the kitchen counter, low so as to avoid the waft of cigarette smoke. Apparently, so-and-so's neighbor had just married Carla's brother's daughter, and this was all very important.

'Did he really now? Well, I'll be damned.' Aunt Joyce had that gift of making every word sound like the most special thing in the world.

'Now I did hear from Nancy over at the church that she heard from Martha that everything was going smoothly so far.' Aunt Joyce let out a long exhale. She had to choose her words carefully when using the party line. You could never be certain that Nancy or Martha or Carla's brother's daughter weren't listening in themselves.

Marie looked over to the couch where Nora sat. Nora, her little sister, was eight and a half and every bit the opposite of Marie. Her soft blonde hair a sharp contrast to Marie's brunette curls. Her cherub-like naivety a far cry from Marie's never-ending quest for a story. They were nothing alike except for a shared mole on their left index fingers. It had been them, Aunt Joyce, and Mama ever since Papa died just before Nora's birth. He'd gotten in an automobile accident driving home from the hospital. He'd been both one of the finest men and one of the finest doctors this side of Tallahassee, they all said — that is, all but Aunt Joyce.

'They'll all tell you he was friendly till the Prohibition, but he was never a pleasure in my book.' Aunt Joyce was Papa's sister, but she always swore allegiance to anyone but. 'He would've sworn the sun came up just to hear him crow,' she'd say quite often. It was her favorite thing to say about him.

Even from an early age, Marie had found it peculiar how people chose to only speak kindly of the dead, perhaps kindlier than they should. Aunt

Joyce sought to equalize that. Where Mama would tell the girls stories of their father being a good and upstanding man, Joyce would do the opposite. She'd tell the girls how she and their father had fought over just about anything and everything. He'd been a staunch Democrat his whole life, and that about did her in. After FDR won the previous November, she admitted that she almost didn't vote for him out of spite.

'I know the Republicans are calling themselves the Democrats nowadays, but I almost couldn't bring myself to fill in that ballot,' she said. 'It's downright unacceptable. We didn't wait this long to vote just for them to switch up on us,' she went on. 'I just thank the Lord that your Papa wasn't alive to see his old liberal sister voting Democrat.'

Growing up, Mama taught the girls to be polite, focused, and God-fearing. Aunt Joyce taught them to always hide their spare coins under the mattress. With Papa dead and Aunt Joyce unmarried, they were never raised by any man. Sure, the two women had their own male-named secrets, but they were never invited to supper. The neighbors pried enough as it was; no sense in greasing their gears any more than necessary.

Back in the kitchen, Nora had now joined Marie.

'Maggie and the girls are doing just fine, alright,' Aunt Joyce said.

The girls' ears perked up at the mention of their names.

'Mmhhmm, they're growing like weeds. If they weren't so damned nosy I'd reckon they were going to grow into right young women,' she continued. 'Ah it's a shame, really. Just no manners, no propriety. No sense of decorum.'

'What's propriety?' Nora whispered into Marie's ear.

Marie shushed her to hide the fact that she herself didn't know. She was supposed to know what words meant. She *did* know that manners were a thing all young girls should have, so propriety must be something worth having as well.

'At this rate, they're going to need a proper whipping soon enough.'

Nora and Marie turned to each other, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

'Girls!' Aunt Joyce hollered.

The two girls slowly rose from their hiding spot and trudged their bare feet over to their aunt, who was sitting in her rocking chair. The chair usually resided on the front porch but would get relocated each time Aunt Joyce had to make her rounds on the telephone.

'What did I tell you girls about being nosy?'

'That it's okay as long as it isn't you or Mama?' Marie guessed.

'Ah, that'll do. Come here now.'

Nora climbed up and settled into her large, soft body while Marie assumed a post balancing on the arm of the chair.

'You ever hear the saying, *Do as I say, not as I do?*' Aunt Joyce asked.

They shook their heads: no.

'Well. Just don't go getting mixed up in other folks' business, that's all.'

'But don't you do it?' Nora asked innocently.

'Do as I say, not as I do,' she restated firmly.

Marie nodded in understanding. Though she was older than Nora, things came more easily to her in a way that likely had little to do with age.

'What does propriety mean?' Marie asked.

'Means being appropriate and behaving rightly,' Aunt Joyce replied.

'You really think we don't have that?' she asked again.

'Oh no, I was only messing with you girls.'

Marie let out an exhale in relief. There were already so many things in her eleven-year-old mind to worry about that; she wasn't sure she could've handled propriety too.

'You girls are polite and smart and going to be beautiful like your mama.'

The girls' faces lit up with smiles. Aunt Joyce's wizened exterior made the pretty words all the more nice whenever she did decide to use them. She was someone who meant what she said.

The two girls sat there as Aunt Joyce rocked back and forth, sipping her drink. They asked for stories about everything. Stories from the big courthouse downtown, where Aunt Joyce worked as a secretary. Stories about Mama and Papa when they were young. Stories about what the world was like outside of Florida. They sat there, just like that, until the cicadas came out with the sunset, and it was time to prepare supper.

* * *

Around six o'clock, Mama returned home from her shift as a nurse over at the boys' school. Aunt Joyce made sure the girls always had an ice-cold glass of water ready to hand her once she came in the door. She'd be worn out, collapsing into the kitchen table, silent until she'd downed her glass.

Slowly, the color would return to her cheeks, the life to her eyes.

Mama was tall and lean. She had wispy brown hair that she kept behind her in a bun most days. Despite her build, she was deceptively strong. She could carry either girl on her hip without even breathing heavily. She began every morning with The Lord's Prayer and occupied the front pew of St. Mary's Episcopal Church each Sunday. She was stoic, unwavering in her character and sense of form.

'How was your day Mama?' Nora asked.

'Oh, it was mighty long today,' she replied.

She always chose her words carefully. She'd say 'mighty' instead of 'terribly' or 'awfully'. She felt it important to practice discernment when it came to such vocabulary. Each day was an opportunity to serve the Lord, and as Christians, they'd better take that opportunity seriously. God didn't sacrifice his only son for them to use ungrateful speech.

'Well, what did you girls learn today?' Mama asked.

Marie and Nora shot looks at one another across the table. Then up to Aunt Joyce. Then back to one another.

'To mind our own business,' Marie replied confidently.

Mama laughed. She then placed both palms on the table and heaved herself up. She moved to the stove to check on the soup Aunt Joyce had put on earlier. It would be rice and sausage and wide-acre peas. It was rice and sausage and wide-acre peas most evenings. As Mama cooked, the girls moved to the living room to occupy themselves with their dolls.

'Did you get around to paying the water bill this afternoon?' Mama asked Aunt Joyce.

'Was I supposed to?' she replied, not even glancing up from her reading.

'I handed you that check from the medical board, didn't I?'

Aunt Joyce didn't respond.

'So, you didn't take care of the water bill?' Mama moved her hand to her hip.

'I get my paycheck tomorrow morning, I'll sort it –'

'The medical board is kind enough to keep offering support and –'

'Well, suppose I'd rather go over to the Chipola River and bring back buckets myself than have Tommy's money pay for my water!' Aunt Joyce retorted.

‘Girls, could you please go fetch the mail?’ Mama called out sharply.

Marie and Nora looked at one another, eager to escape the escalation that was about to ensue, and took off out of the kitchen. Before Mama could reply to Aunt Joyce, the front door had already slammed shut.

Barefoot, they sprinted down the dirt road that ran in front of their house. Their hair shaking wildly behind them, arms flailing, dresses rustling from the sudden movement, paying no mind to any dust that was kicking up. Nora reached the mailboxes at the end of the road first, slapping one labeled ‘Wilson’ and whooping victoriously into the still, humid air. Marie reached her seconds later, breathless. When she finally looked up, out of the corner of her right eye, she noticed a boy standing with a bike far across the street, watching them. He couldn’t have been any older than sixteen, and while he looked familiar, she couldn’t place him. She got the creeping sense, though, that he certainly knew who they were.

She ushered Nora to hurry up. She reached into the second mailbox labeled ‘Miller’ and pulled out its contents: one magazine for Aunt Joyce, two bills from the city, and one letter addressed to Mama. The letter caught Marie’s eye. The top right corner, where there should have been a stamp, was empty. She turned back to the street, but the boy was gone.

The girls walked back towards the house. Marie glanced behind her every ten seconds or so, but Baker Avenue was empty. Silent. You could hear the soft patter of Nora kicking each little pebble that came across her feet, the insistent song of the cicadas, the low grumble of a truck engine, somewhere.

They re-entered the kitchen, and Nora deposited the mail into Aunt Joyce’s lap. Nora returned to the living room, but Marie kept a curious eye on Aunt Joyce as she flipped through the letters. When she reached the stamp-less one addressed to Mama, she paused. Marie could’ve sworn that all the pink in her cheeks had sunk straight down to her hands. Red, swollen, and clammy, they shook as they held the letter in between fingers. She watched as Aunt Joyce looked across the kitchen to Mama, facing the stove, blind to the back of her. She then, quickly, carefully, slipped the letter into the waistband of her skirt. Once it was neatly tucked away, she turned to her side, catching Marie’s gaze. She held it there. She made no reaction, spoke no words. Her eyeline remained steady, her lips still. She simply looked across the room at Marie, her expression impenetrable.

There are things at eleven that a bright girl can understand. Manners, propriety — these are sound concepts. The principles upon which a good home is built, how a good woman behaves. Such items come with the territory and are practicable lessons that produce tangible results: Good posture. ‘Yes, ma’am,’ and ‘No, sir.’ Proverbs 31.

And then there are the things buried deep beneath the dirt, embedded in the walls, disintegrating away in the attic. Existing invisibly until a single moment. Perhaps a stranger across the street or a letter delivered without a stamp. Until, suddenly, the plaster peels and the truth seeps up through the floorboards. And yet, to a bright eleven-year-old girl, these things remain a riddle. One where she knows neither the question nor the answer. Instead, it becomes a secret to hold, a ringing in her ears, a needle in her side. Something to carry in her own waistband, close and hidden.

Anne Boyd Rioux

A WAR OF HER OWN

SYNOPSIS: *A War of her Own* is based on the real-life story of *The New Yorker* writer Kay Boyle. Trapped with her abusive husband, artist Laurence Vail, and his ex-wife Peggy Guggenheim in France during WWII, she falls in love with an Austrian refugee who needs rescuing as much as she does.

Chapter 1

The French Alps
March 1940

It wasn't time yet.

The girls were banging into the room and hoisting the portable Underwood off the bed where Kay sat with it propped on a cushion. They were tired of its click-clack-click echoing throughout the chalet. They wanted her to get dressed and come see the decorations they had made.

But it wasn't time yet. The sun was still casting slanted shapes across the wood-paneled room.

'I was right in the middle of a sentence, girls. Give it back now,' Kay said, exhausted from writing all day. 'You know not to come in when I'm on a deadline.'

'Papa told us to,' Pegeen said, hanging her head, her long legs dangling from her green skirt, white socks rolled up her ankles. 'He said he will tell everyone to go away, unless you get ready.'

Kay's eyes narrowed, but she held her tongue.

'And Peggy is complaining about the noise,' said Bobby, peering at her mother from under her fringe, the rest of her hair braided and wrapped around her head. She was a few inches shorter than Pegeen.

‘Girls, you both look lovely, and I know you’re excited for the party, but please tell your father I’ve got another hour at least. And you can tell Peggy I’m awfully sorry my work requires the use of a typewriter, but someone needs to pay the grocer’s bills and clothe all of you!’

She stood up and held out her hands. The girls sheepishly returned the confiscated machine, closing the door behind them.

Kay fumed, but not at the girls. What she had really wanted to say was that both Laurence and Peggy could go to hell. Laurence had insisted on hosting their usual Good Friday aperitif, in spite of her protests. She hated how everyone acted as if this spring were like any other, how skiers still filled the cafés and clubs as if the Germans were on another planet instead of amassing on the border.

Gradually, her fingers began to fly over the keys again. They thwacked forcefully against the paper, making the most satisfying sound she knew. It meant that the words were coming, that sentences were taking shape. She sent them tumbling and meandering through a thicket of sensation and emotion, building structures of thought and image, doing the work she needed them to do. For another hour, as the sun slid behind the mountains and the room grew dim, she lived inside of them, listening for where they faltered or needed shoring up, using them to convey something of what she wanted to say about these strange times they were living through in France, when loyalties and nationalities and prejudices were bubbling up, threatening to erupt into violence.

Finally, she typed the last words of her story. She stacked the pages on top of the desk and pulled out an envelope, writing out the address for Harold Ross at *The New Yorker*. Resting back against the chair, she closed her eyes. It was done. It had come pouring out of her like blood. She sighed. She would love a hot bath.

Instead, she tugged on her girdle, clipped on her nylons, slipped on her dress, and put on her make-up. A bit like a soldier preparing for battle, she thought.

In the lounge, she found Peggy, sitting in Laurence’s chair by the fireplace, dangling a cigarette from her nail-bitten fingers and halfway through what was probably not her first drink.

‘I hope you found the hotel comfortable and *quiet* enough for you,’

Kay said.

'It will do,' she said, eying Kay's black merino dress and red scarf tied around her neck. Kay returned her gaze, glancing at Peggy's cellophane dress with a pink slip underneath. Neither bothered to comment. Peggy leaned her head back to blow smoke into the air and put a hand up to hold the orange taffeta headdress she had clipped precariously onto her pouf of frizzy hair.

Kay poured herself a glass of Dubonnet and wished that someone would walk through the door. If she had known when she married Laurence that she'd have to put up with regular visits from his ex-wife, she might not have gone through with it.

'It's strangely quiet, like a terrible crime has occurred,' Peggy said. 'Has half the family been murdered?' She laughed at her own joke. Peggy often called attention to the large size of the Vail clan. Kay recalled something she had overheard her saying to Laurence last Christmas: *'When is she going to stop having children? God, if I were that fertile, I wouldn't let you even look at me.'* Kay's fourth child — Laurence's sixth — had been born a year ago, and she swore that would be her last.

'The three youngest are with their nurse for the evening,' Kay said.

'I invited a friend. I hope you don't mind,' Peggy said, swinging her leg up and down as if she were already impatient for him to arrive. 'I met him in Chamonix.'

Just then, Sinbad walked in, a stack of records clutched to his chest, looking rather dashing and grown-up in his dress jacket. 'Not that Italian who was drooling over your hand at the hotel bar!' he said.

'He has a very chivalric manner. I rather like it,' Peggy said, and the two began arguing.

Kay retreated to the window, looking out at the inky sky and the rim of white-capped mountains circling the horizon. She took a deep breath and a long drink. Soon, the girls' voices came in from the stairwell. Behind them was Laurence, carrying a crate of liquor from the cellar, wearing his most flamboyant red and gold brocade jacket, which he had had made from old curtains long ago. It was frayed at the cuffs and too tight to button, but he didn't care. Behind him were the first guests, Arnaud and Simone, who owned the Café Splendide. Kay came out to greet them.

'Her Highness graces us with her presence,' Laurence said as he passed

her, his pipe clenched between his teeth and his breath already reeking of whiskey. She held herself straighter in response. He used to like saying that he had married an ancient goddess with a Roman nose — although the bump was from a childhood accident — but more and more now he mocked her for her poised bearing and her straight back, as if he'd prefer it bent.

An hour later, the large lounge that spread across the front of the chalet was full to its dark rafters with raised voices and liquor-infused laughter. The strains of smooth chansons from the gramophone meandered through the crowd.

Kay was talking to Simone and her Irish friend Nina, who was as tall and lithe as Simone was squat and plump. Pegeen suddenly appeared at Kay's side and put an arm around her waist.

'Show us your decorations,' Kay said, placing her arm around the girl's shoulders.

Pegeen smiled shyly and lifted up a cut-out that had been dangling on a thread from the back of a nearby chair. It was a picture of a brown basket labeled *Les Six Enfants*, the name of their chalet, containing heads arranged like eggs, blades of grass sprouting from their ears.

'That's Papa,' she said, pointing to a red face with a few tufts of yellow hair. 'And there's Kay,' pointing to a head with bright red lips, blue eyes, and black waves of hair that floated as if underwater. Pointing at the other, smaller heads, she said, 'And that's Sinbad, Bobby, Kathe, Apple, Clover, and me. And there's Mama.' She pointed to a head on the other end with an orange blob atop a wild nest of black hair.

'Such talent!' Simone said.

'You are your father's daughter,' Nina said.

Kay pulled Pegeen closer and kissed her thick golden hair, barely tamed by two barrettes.

'They are so original! The best Easter decorations I've ever seen!' Kay could feel eyes boring into her back from across the room. Those would be Peggy's — she knew without having to turn around.

'Now go off and find Bobby,' Kay said. 'You know she wants to be by your side every minute you're here with us.'

As soon as Pegeen walked away, Simone turned her eager brown eyes

to Kay.

'What do you hear from Kurt? How is he managing?'

'Not a word for a few weeks now.' Kay looked over Nina's shoulder at Laurence. His back was turned and he was laughing at something.

'Oh? I thought you were staying in touch with him,' Simone said.

'Well, yes, I . . . we — the family, I mean — have been writing to him to keep his spirits up. He was — I mean, *is* — our neighbor after all.'

'It's such a shame. He's missed the entire season!' Simone shook her head. 'So much business he would have had up at the ski school. We've had the café full until 3am most nights!'

'It's strange you haven't heard from him. You must be concerned,' Nina said.

'I believe the camp commander banned letter-writing. One of his friends said he was threatening to. This friend is named Baron von Franckenstein, if you can believe it. Have I told you about him?' she asked, turning to Nina, happy to have someone besides Kurt to talk about. 'I've been writing to him as well. The poor man has no friends who know where he is. He writes perfect English. He studied over in England, yet there he is, locked up like the rest, just for being Austrian, even though it could not be more plain which side he's on. He's severely anti-Nazi!'

'Is he going to be in your book?' Nina asked. You could tell she was a dancer from the way she held her glass of wine lightly between her fingers and lifted it to her lips in one graceful motion. If birds drank from wineglasses, Kay thought, then that is how they would do it.

'What book is this?' Simone wanted to know.

'Oh, it's something I've been trying to write about the Austrian men at the camp. It's been very slow going, though. I just don't have enough details.'

'It's too bad they wouldn't let you in when you tried to visit,' Nina said. Kay's eyes went to Laurence's back again. He was still absorbed in conversation, and she could hear the owner of the largest hotel in town asking him questions: 'How is the art going, Laurence? Sold anything recently?'

'I saw enough from the outside to know that it's criminal what they are doing. Can you imagine being locked up in an abandoned factory in the woods for six months? It makes my blood boil.' Kay was growing

agitated, but she kept her voice low. 'And here we are, skiing and having parties and staying warm by our fires. I feel like an absolute fraud.' She crumpled the small square napkin in her hand. She heard Peggy's cackle rise over the hum of conversation, and her back stiffened.

'It must be so hard for Kurt,' Nina said, looking into her wine, 'to be locked up with a hundred other men. The poor man has had no one to admire him all these months.'

'Oh, Nina!' Kay scoffed. Laurence turned around, and she could tell from his red glare that he'd like to throttle the mercenary hotel owner — and probably her, too.

'I really should get the tray of cheese and saucissons to circulate,' Kay said and excused herself.

In the kitchen, she poured herself another glass of wine. It was her third drink. She had better slow down, she told herself, but she was just starting to feel the edge wear down after her day of writing. Finally, forcing her lips into a smile, she returned to the lounge and began to make her way through the smoke-hazed room.

'So, Signor Martelli,' one of the men was saying to Peggy's friend, 'will we see the Italians coming over the mountains soon?' His fingers marched across the tray and scooped up a cluster of saucissons.

'What a question!' Peggy scoffed. 'Pegeen! Don't dance so wildly, dear!' she yelled across the room, holding up her palm to Kay's tray. 'You look like a banshee!'

'Don't be absurd. They know the defenses are too strong up there,' Arnaud said, delicately picking up two pieces of cheese.

'But they've always wanted more of the Alps. Once the Germans begin to march, they'll want their fingers in the pie.'

Kay continued to circulate through the party, brandishing her tray, playing the happy hostess while mentally taking note of conversation that she might be able to use in a story.

'Don't tell me they didn't execute women and chop off the hands of children in the last war. I was there!'

'We'll be lucky to see the Germans here. We are 200 miles from the border.'

'*Lucky!* Ha!'

'The mayor says we'll have no choice but to hang out the white sheets

for *les boches* if they come.'

Kay noticed Bobby sneaking out to the stairwell with Pegeen and her school friend behind her. She wondered where they were off to.

'Why not roll out the red carpet? There are plenty of people who would rather have Hitler in charge than the working people, any day.'

'Oh Stéphane, you do exaggerate!'

'I don't know why we just don't dynamite the bridge.'

Suddenly, a long insistent ring of the downstairs bell broke through the noise of the party. The voices and music carried on, but Kay stood still, wondering who it could be. Everyone knew to just come up.

The bell rang out again, longer this time.

'Laurence, will you go and see?' Kay called out.

She saw him leaning into the circle of men around Peggy. Clearly, he had heard her. She stared at him, feeling the room sway a bit, and started to walk towards the stairway when she heard Peggy's voice.

'Laurence, don't make your wife do everything. Be the man of the house for once!' It was odd for Peggy to stick up for her, but she loved to make anyone bristle.

Laurence reluctantly moved towards the door, snapping at Peggy.

'I don't know why you don't go down yourself, as much as *you'd* like to be the man of the house.'

Peggy laughed, a bit too loudly, throwing her head back and grabbing her Italian's arm.

When Laurence returned, he almost stumbled on the threshold but steadied himself. He found Kay's eyes and motioned her towards him with a jerk of his head. He was holding a telegram with her name on it. She took it and began to walk out of the room, but he grabbed her wrist.

'You can open it here,' he said. 'Let's see what it says.' His forehead had reddened up to his hairline, where a few wisps of pale hair were all that remained from a once-luxurious crop of golden wheat.

She obeyed, tearing open the seal and unfolding it. Her eyes swam over the ticker tape glued to the paper.

'Who's it from?' he asked.

'It's nothing,' she said, folding it back up and tucking it under the strap of her brassiere.

'Let me see it, then!' He groped at the neckline of her dress, and she

grabbed his hand.

'It's not important, I told you... Please don't make a scene,' she whispered. 'We can discuss this later.'

'It's from Kurt, isn't it? You've been writing to that bastard for months, and now he thinks he can send a telegram to my wife.'

'Yes, it's from him, but it's nothing, really.'

'What does he want?' His red, half-vacant eyes had nothing human in them. She struggled, but he gripped her more tightly, twisting the tender skin on the underside of her wrist and making her whimper in spite of herself.

'It just says that he's left the camp and joined the Foreign Legion.'

'What a fool!' A faux jolly kind of laugh came out of Laurence's mouth. 'And? He's asked you to come meet him somewhere, hasn't he?' He spoke loudly now, noticeably slurring his words. Some of the chatter around the room grew quieter as people turned to look at them. Then he threw his head back and began to bellow, in French now, so that everyone could understand. 'Or is he coming here so the whole town can witness your tryst?' His rancid breath enveloped her.

Peggy's high laugh abruptly ceased, and someone turned down the jazzy music. Laurence yanked Kay against his hot, sagging body. Her cheeks flamed, her stomach clenched. *Not now, not here.* There was a time when she had laughed at his drunken antics — standing on café tables in Paris, taking a swipe at a gendarme who had called him a nasty foreigner — but that was long ago.

'Let go of me, you drunken ass!' Kay said, not caring anymore what half the town heard.

Arnaud came to Laurence's side, taking his other arm and trying to pull him away.

'Suffit, Laurence, suffit!'

Laurence yanked his arm back and only grew louder. 'That demi-god Aryan ski instructor — that is who my wife thinks she's in love with! Or maybe she'd just like to fuck him!'

Kay stared straight into his bloodshot eyes. She saw the bulging vein on his temple and wished suddenly that it would burst.

'Maybe I finally should, for once, since that is all you ever think of!' Kay spat at him.

‘You whore,’ Laurence sputtered. ‘You God-damned WHORE!’

The shock of that awful word hit her at the same instant as his hand against her head. There was a loud ringing, then nothing but blackness.

Jill Craig

AMALIA

SYNOPSIS: *Amalia* draws inspiration from a famous literary tragedy. It looks at the corrosive effects of contrast, and the challenge of maintaining a sense of self when measured time after time against another.

Her robe is tied loosely at the waist. The thin cold sunlight of the Dales glints onto the crumbed table with its ever-present, dismal little rack of toast. How on earth *this place*, with its spluttering clouds and heavy skies, how this place produced such a brilliant, hulking heft of a man will forever be beyond her. Poking at the bland porridge, she tries to make a face at him. His eyes stay stubbornly affixed on *The Times*, blast him. Twenty minutes ago, when she'd woken up, she'd gone into his room to borrow socks and found only the rumpled sheets, a crook where his head had been. How infantilizing — separate rooms. Has there ever been anything so ridiculous? Her nostrils flare.

Tempting to walk out. Instead, she turns to Sonia in her highchair.

Open up darling, she says cheerily.

The little girl beams at her gummily. No indication of response from the poet.

She holds the spoon aloft and smiles. She makes sure to loudly proclaim, My, my, what beautiful eyes you have — such a piercing blue!

It's a monumental effort to stop herself from adding, *I wonder where you got them from, zayka?*

Not that anyone responds, unless she counts the poet's mother, clattering around with even more emphasis than usual at the sink.

I'd like to get this table cleared soon. It's past ten. What an absurd hour for breakfast.

Sonia begins to wail. Finally, drawn from his pressing world of the

paper, the poet looks up with a frown.

Your daughter. What's the matter with her?

It takes every drop of strength not to shove the porridge spinning into his lap. What child wouldn't be beside themselves with that racket of pots and pans in the background? Her hand clenches on Sonia's spoon before she sets it carefully down. She lifts their now crying daughter into her arms, feeling his mother's disapproving eyes on where her robe has fallen open. With any other man, she would have bitten back.

Shush, she says instead, rocking the little girl. Sonia... *Sonechka*, shush.

No apology from his mother. Hell would sooner freeze.

And it's this day next week you go? she tuts, shoving a dishcloth over the crumb-strewn table.

The poet nods. Far be it for him to let his mother go unanswered.

For the life of me, your father and I can't understand why you'd go all the way there. Ireland! When there's plenty of space here.

* * *

The night before they travel, she tosses and turns. Maybe this was how her mother felt, the night before they fled. Just as she is about to drop off, the poet mumbles something, inchoate, next to her, before gasping into wakefulness. He fumbles for the lamp switch and yellow light pools. Feeling his fingers on her arm, she sits up reluctantly against the frilled pillow. Her own half dreams, half memories, were full of the whispers of other languages. What is it he's saying? That awful chintzy wallpaper comes into focus.

His face looms before her.

Slow down, darling...

He's on his knees in his boxers before her, nearly bouncing. Even now, when in mere hours they must load the children into the car, with such a long day ahead of them, the sight of that bare chest, the brawn of it... still, yes, it does something to her.

He's still talking.

Yes, gracious: the fish have returned. Apparently, salmon have now played a starring role in his dreams — he is telling her that he dreamt he was sitting on a riverbank and spotted their glorious pink bodies

momentarily aloft; a wingless arrowing across the spinning river. He speaks with his hands, imitating their *effortless soaring*.

What she wouldn't give for a cigarette now.

Better to nod. Hard to match his excitement, though she knows full well how much stock he puts in his dreams. She makes her face solemn. By God, all the big thinkers — the men especially! — seem to.

He interrupts this thought.

Amalia, sweet, don't you see? This is wonderful. A sign, surely.

When he kisses her the bristles of his large, unshaven chin prick. He warbles on and begins kissing her arms and neck feverishly until she begins to laugh. The relief that washes through her is as pure and shining as a summer shower. As his teeth start to nibble at her nipple, she hopes with fervour that Ireland will be good for them.

It has to be. It must.

* * *

They take a ferry, then a bus into Dublin, then another to the remote, west coast village. On the way to Holyhead, the children in the back play 'I spy', though, poor darlings, it's not like there's much to see: milky sky, industrial roads, speeding cars.

The salmon have rubbed off on the poet. Helpful, really. He blethers on about plans.

We'll borrow a car from James, my pal from Oxford, he says. We'll need one. This isn't like London.

So tempting to retort that of course she understands; really, they both know it's hardly her first time in Ireland. She manages to catch herself in time — no need, really, to ruin his good mood.

The poet continues.

He'll meet us off the last bus. His wife, Orla, will keep him to it. Apparently, she knows a girl from the village who can help with the children.

She keeps her response nonchalant, though she steals a glance at his expression.

Oh, how good of Orla... what's she like?

At the roundabout, the poet signals for the first exit. He says, not

without irony, that James was a great one for Orwell at college. Always fancied living off the land, and then he met Orla, from the back end of nowhere.

He drops his voice and checks the rear-view mirror.

James never liked her. Especially not last time we were there.

She glances at him, secretly delighted. It's not hard to know who he means.

Why not? she asks.

Not sure. Neither of them took to her actually.

On the ferry, a grey sea churns beneath and around them as the poet takes charge. Couples and families drink tea from thermoses and unwrap homemade sandwiches from foil; she spreads her coat over herself and uses her fur hat as a pillow. She'd do a dance of thanks to the salmon if she had the energy. She half-watches as he gathers all three to him, even puts their daughter on his knee.

His face is stern as he tells them of Irish giants and the wars with their Scottish foe.

Finn McCool, though don't worry — he's in the North, you see — focused on keeping Benadonner at bay. They hate each other! Born of envy, probably...

The children are rapt.

...And fear that one is bigger than the other. Though they're both giants! Bigger than a house.

Bigger than Big Ben? one of the children asks, thumb in his mouth and eyes wide with amazement.

The poet pretends to consider this with the utmost seriousness.

I would say about the same size. That's a good comparison; well done, love.

The children look at each other in astonishment, then shriek with laughter when he suddenly tickles them. Her eyelashes flutter open as he kisses her and murmurs that he is taking the children out to the deck.

* * *

They get off the bus in their new village in the late afternoon light of winter. They are met by shorn hedges, those God-awful pebble-dashed

houses the Irish love, a salt-laced wind. Hardly any buildings and empty roads. Drystone walls meander everywhere. Tens of metres away, the dark sea rises and falls. So, this is it.

Good grief, Amalia says.

She tries to summon some cheerfulness.

This feels like the end of the world, doesn't it, children? What an adventure!

The house is draughty. The famous Orla — am I to be bested by yet another bloody housewife? she thinks — has tried to scrub the cupboards and the mould from the walls, speckled with black. No matter — at least for a while, it's *theirs*. No-one else's. The sheets in the rooms feel chilled, and the walls are lined with old, flowered wallpaper. Amalia leads the children from room to room, *oohing* and *ahhing* over the garden with the swing, spotted from the kitchen window, and the many, many places to play brand new games of hide-and-seek.

He's watching her. Measuring her.

She points to the rain watering the fields a verdant green.

Maybe it's Benadonner crying, hmmm?

She tickles her daughter's soft small feet and speaks brightly to all three.

What do you think, darlings? Ready for an adventure?

Test passed, perhaps — either that or the salmon, to whom she is starting to feel a warm affinity, for the poet laughs and juggles an apple from a bowl. Something in her spine unknots.

You know, sweet T, she says, setting their daughter on the sofa and sliding her arms around his waist in the way she knows he likes. I think you might be right about here, you clever boy. I think we'll be just fine.

* * *

If only they could see me now, she often thinks as the weeks slide by. The thought of it still causes her to shudder, everyone picking like oversized crows over the bones of it all. All those months of people staring and muttering about her. Just look at the two of us! she thinks victoriously; planting and seeding and sowing like we were born to do it.

Small vegetables and herbs are coaxed from dense soil. She, who loves cities and fashion and all things beautiful (and why shouldn't she! There

has been enough doom and gloom over the previous years, heaven knows) — she has a new lease of life. She finds herself airing the rooms and decorating the sills with shells from the beach and striking driftwood. And she has time for painting again — what a gift, after all those endless hours of toil in the office, where she was beginning to feel like some silly whippet, running at full pelt just to keep pace.

For a sliver of a moment, she remembers with unease how one of the girls had said, But what will you *do* there?

And yet it was worth it, no doubt.

Here, why, she is one of those women who lays out paints and laughs with the children, encouraging them and enjoying their tangential chatter. She begins to illustrate old versions of the poet's work in minute, brilliant detail. When the children are at school and the girl from the village — wide-featured, ugly shoes, Amalia finds with relief; nothing to worry about there — cares for Sonia, she pins her hair up and wraps it in a silk scarf, dons a heavy coat and gloves, and heads outside. She works diligently in the garden under oyster-coloured skies. One afternoon, looking up and feeling a small pleasure that she can read a coming squall in the wind, she removes her thick gloves and goes inside.

Hey-ho, she calls. Darling? Would you like a cup of tea?

She pokes her head around the door into the room the poet is using as an office and finds him hunched at a small desk, paper before him. Words flood the sheet.

You're working, she says gently. Oh, I'm so pleased.

He looks up and the smile he gives her lightens her.

Hello, beautiful one. I could do with your help actually.

He picks up a shell from his desk, one shaped like a trumpet, with an interior that is nearly tangerine — so strange on an Irish coastline. His large hands on it; so mesmerising.

Mine? she says, pleasure uncoiling in her.

Yours, he confirms.

He starts to tell her of an image he's struggling with, one which will not be moulded into shape. His palms spread wide in exasperation.

She sits on the edge of the hard single bed with its lace coverlet. Focusing entirely on him, his fingers, the deep timbre of his voice, she nods her head. But — thank goodness, she thinks with gratitude — an

idea comes to her.

There's a phrase in Arabic, she says loosely, which I think might help...

And as she begins to speak, his eyes fix on her. How strange, she thinks, this feeling. Is this what it means to have exactly what you want?

* * *

What *ghastly* prices, she says loudly in the claustrophobic aisles of the shop. Loudly enough for that shopkeeper with his ruddy face and lingering eyes to hear her.

He scowls.

Shush, the poet scolds her, though he's laughing. I have a solution, if you're game?

He practises with James first, then they load the children into the borrowed car and drive it along tiny, hedge-lined lanes to find dark lakes.

I spy, with my little eye... he teases.

Some mackerel! Amalia interjects. Or you will, when your talented Daddy catches it!

Out of the car, she walks them around the edge of the field, picking bunches of sweet-smelling primroses as he sits on the banks and waits for the line to tauten.

Good God, what a man. And this was all his idea; she should have had more faith. She wants a moment to soak him in. Turning to his children, she instructs them.

Take your sister's hands, little loves. Gently now.

The lake shivers in the breeze; the long grass too, as if in apprehension. It makes her think of those moments just before his body locks with hers. Last night, he'd said when they were done — such gorgeous wonder in his voice — that everything here is an inspiration. He'd said, holding her at the hip, inches from her, that at times, when he fishes or walks or writes, his mind is a blank slate. And then, more thoughtfully, that sometimes what comes to him is Amalia's perfect, undappled thighs spread before him. Then he'd lifted his hand to her right breast and squeezed it through the sheet; spoke of the soaring haggard, a female hawk he'd seen one evening silhouetted against a gloomy sky. Its prey was held in its talons. She'd been enthralled. Wanted a cigarette again, but couldn't bear to lift

his hand from her body.

Oh? she'd said demurely, though her heart was racing.

She watches him now at the bank of the lake, the absolute stillness of him. The children are filling their pockets with silken petals behind her, and as she watches him, she replays all of that in her head. Is that what he's thinking of now, she wonders. Never before has she wanted with such intensity to climb into the skin of the other, to bury into his brain, and know what is there.

At this, he glances over at her, as though in unison with her thoughts.

* * *

Sonia's birthday comes. They are on the edge of the world, the brink of wildness, but a cake must be made nonetheless. Orla is enlisted. She brings a recipe from the W.I. and they bake a cake with two layers and thick icing, though the oven is temperamental. Amalia wants things just so; she worries over the oven. Upstairs, the poet is busy at work, mugs scattered around him.

She tilts her head upwards as she adopts a tone of confidence.

He's working on something rather wonderful; I can feel it in my bones.

There's a typical dourness in Orla's response.

Oh, really? James said he was having problems writing.

Oh, he was. Not anymore though.

She is feeling magnanimous enough to elaborate (maybe because of last night's excited conversation about always living here, making it permanent... though Orla's plainness, her big doughy face typical of the Irishwomen here, well, that helps), and so she continues.

He's marvellous. One for the ages.

Well, that's alright then, isn't it?

Orla's lack of interest irritates her as she pours the batter into a lined tin.

Orla asks instead whether Amalia has been bored here, after London. She smooths her hands wistfully along the worn surface of her skirt. Such tentativeness in her question.

What's London like? Is it as mad as they all say?

Amalia pauses at the sink. She has filled it with lukewarm, soapy water

— the boiler is cranky and unreliable, too — and inserts dishes smeared with eggs and butter.

Well, who on earth says it's mad, she says, deliberately misunderstanding Orla's choice of words. What an odd thing to say!

Jes'... Orla begins. Well, you're jes' so glamorous. Everything must seem so small here in comparison.

Her good graces return somewhat. She strives to be more patient.

I thought I would be. I was... apprehensive, I suppose, about coming here. I love London. It's really quite thrilling. Or... it used to be.

She looks fleetingly at Orla, with her wide hips and large hands.

It's not for everyone though. Have you never been?

Orla shakes her head.

No. Not yet.

She laughs and gestures to herself self-deprecatingly.

You wouldn't recognise me there. Different clothes, different hair.

Orla takes a cloth to the counters and begins to scrub at stubborn patches of butter and sugar.

I'm sure that's not true. You'd look good in anything.

She turns away.

So they say.

They fall quiet for a moment. The cake will be hidden in a top cupboard until the next morning. Orla is looking critically at her bitten nails when Amalia continues.

Though that's still not enough — is it?

The look Orla gives her is uncomprehending.

What d'you mean?

Well, you need to be brilliant to keep a man like that.

Orla blinks.

From what I've heard, you are.

Is that how it looks to you?

Amalia leans against a cupboard. She holds an unlit cigarette in her hand, upper arm against her torso. She gives a small bite of a laugh.

How strange.

A gull calls outside. Unnervingly human. Amalia thinks of the poet scribbling upstairs. After a moment, she sets her cigarette to the side, starts the tap again, and begins the dishes.

Olivia Gledhill

IF THE FATES DENY

SYNOPSIS: *If The Fates Deny* is a Western retelling of Orpheus and Eurydice, set in 1890s Texas. It follows a small-town sheriff who poses as a travelling singer to infiltrate a criminal gang and recover his lost lover.

Part II

Jake led the way, riding close-reined through mesquite and prickly pear. The two stolen mares walked slowly with their heads hung low, their entire bodies twitching as their thick coats snagged on the thorns. If Jake hadn't already sweetened them with sugar cubes, he would have thought they were protesting being stolen, but no, it was more likely that the poor things were just parched from the dry country. The Texas Rangers were known for a lot of things, but taking care of their horseflesh wasn't one of them.

He could hear Maxim and August a little distance behind him, the sound of their heavy horses trotting through the packed desert dirt as they followed Jake back to the wagons. They'd spent a few weeks working odd jobs in a large town called Woodbank, but they'd finally worn out their welcome when young Ivy had been caught pickpocketing, so they'd decided to leave in the middle of the night, their wagons slipping through the night unseen. They'd parked up on the bank of the Pecos, sheltered behind a large shale ridge, just in case the law came looking. Jake had never been much good at finding his way in the dark, and there were few landmarks out in the desert. He only remembered a tree, split in two by lightning, the grey trunk scarred by long slashes. The markings had reminded him of the tiger he had seen in a picture book once. If he could find the tiger tree, he could find the river.

He trudged on through the night, watching the sky as it lightened into a dusty purple, the sun rising at his back. One of the mares tossed her head and sighed.

‘Alright, girls. Ain’t far now, I promise,’ he said, hoping he was right.

The stars started to disappear overhead, making way for yet another relentlessly hot day. Although there wasn’t much to do in West Texas except sweat, Jake found himself quite fond of the place, far from the bustling cities and the cattle drives and the wagon trains and the brainless pioneers who couldn’t tell a coyote from a wolf. Out here, the land was untouched; the sage brush shivered under nothing but the wind. He heard a fox yipping in the distance, then another responding, further away, and he wondered if they were warning each other of the strange scent of man in the air.

By the time he spotted the tiger tree, the sky was a pale pink, the day’s heat beginning to settle close to the ground. Jake took off his hat, placed it on his saddle horn, and ran his hand through his sweaty hair. He felt his shirt already clinging to his damp skin. Nobody was ever dry in West Texas.

He thought about looking back to see where Maxim and August were. They’d both fallen back; although their horses were younger than Jake’s coal-black stallion, they couldn’t match Caesar’s endurance. Caesar had been with Jake for more than twenty years — he was more of a partner than a horse. He couldn’t picture a world where he did not have Caesar’s powerful body beneath him, though one day he’d have to face reality. There was already a knot of scar tissue on Caesar’s shoulder where he had been shot by a bullet intended for Jake. None of his horses had ever died of old age.

As he neared the sound of the rumbling river, he quickened his pace. He knew that August and Maxim would find their way just fine. August was one of the best trackers Jake had ever known; if he could find food when everything edible seemed to have gone extinct, he could certainly follow Caesar’s heavy tracks. Jake wanted to get back alone, to think up what he would say to August to ease whatever sort of rage he would certainly be in. It was a simple problem: Maxim had told Jake to steal the two mares, August had told him not to. Jake had chosen. Not because Maxim had told him to, but because it made the most sense to him. If the

Texas Rangers really were tracking them, their two scouts wouldn't get far on foot. There were other decisions he could have made all by himself, like cutting the men's throats while they were sleeping, but dead rangers were sometimes more troublesome than live ones.

He followed the sloping terrain down to the riverbank, the horses' hooves slipping through the crumbling shale. It was the perfect place for a bunch of outlaws to hide: the ridge wall protecting them on one side, and the river forming a frothing barrier on the other.

Matilda came into sight, holding a shotgun in both hands, a wet petticoat draped over her shoulder. Her red hair was tied back into its usual loose braid. When she saw Jake, she lowered the gun.

'Goddamn, you scared the hell outta me. I thought you was them rangers,' she said.

'Ain't got a guard posted?' Jake asked, his eyes scanning the camp to see who was up and about. He could see Mika and Ivy by the river, seemingly helping Matilda with the laundry. Ivy was standing barefoot in the river, still in her white nightdress.

'Yeah, Buck's up there.' She pointed up at the craggy ridge. She slid the shotgun over her shoulder — the one that wasn't covered by the soggy petticoat — and walked beside Caesar and the two weary mares. 'It's that damned river, can't hear a thing over all that noise. We need to start posting two guards.'

'Sure. Throw me into the rotation,' Jake said.

'I would, but you're always busy robbin' people. Speaking of which, where did you get them horses?'

Jake saw no point in making up a story. 'Stole em from those scouts.'

'The rangers? Are you outta your mind? You know, horse theft is a hangin' crime in these parts.'

'Horse theft is a hanging crime in most parts,' Jake said. She stopped and looked up at him, brows furrowed, looking somewhat like an angry eagle. 'It was Maxim's idea,' he added.

'Oh, was it? And where is Maxim now?'

'Him and August were behind me.'

'And you didn't think to wait for them?'

'Nah, they can make their own way. They ain't infirms yet.'

Jake dropped down from his saddle at the edge of camp, where the other

horses were hitched to a rope tied between two thick branches. The horses were eager to see him — they knew that he was soft on them, always slipping them sugar cubes and peppermints and pieces of carrot or apple. While Jake unfastened the stolen mares' halters from his saddle, Matilda watched, her arms folded. Her silence was usually more worrisome than her rage, so Jake just went about his business, hoping she'd go away. For a moment, he thought he'd gotten lucky. Ivy and Mika caught her attention with their shrieking laughter — Mika had draped somebody's long johns over his head and was tossing them about like he had long hair, no doubt impersonating Matilda.

'Hey! Do it proper or don't do it at all!' Matilda yelled across the campsite.

'We won't do it at all then,' Mika shouted back. 'I swear, woman, you think I'm some sorta housewife.'

'Don't speak to me like that, boy. Now finish hangin' those clothes, it ain't hard.'

'If it ain't hard, do it yourself!'

Jake couldn't help smiling as he watched Mika lift Ivy into his arms like a bride and dash out into the river, the long johns falling off his head and floating atop the glass-like water.

'Suppose you would think it's funny,' Matilda said.

'They're just harmless kids,' Jake said. He looked at her, wordlessly communicating what she already knew — that, once upon a time, they were just like those kids, with bloody histories and nowhere else to go. If Maxim didn't have a soft spot for strays, he didn't like to think where he would be now. The old hereafter, probably. Or a state penitentiary.

'So what's the plan for them horses, then?' Matilda asked. She took the petticoat off her shoulder and shook it out. A damp patch had spread across her blouse.

'Well, they'll need watering before they drop dead.'

'And then?'

'I'll sell em, I guess. There's that little town across the river. Fairlie, I think it's called.'

'What about the brands?'

'What brands?'

'The military brands,' Matilda said. Jake let go of the halters and moved

around the mares, where he saw the brands in question, the letters 'US' pressed into their hindquarters.

'Goddamn,' Jake said. Matilda smiled with that gleam in her eyes that she only ever got when she was right and everybody else was wrong. Before he had time to come up with a solution, he heard a shout from above, up on the ridge, then saw Maxim's sleek roan horse making her way down to the riverbank. She almost looked pink in the light of the rising sun, her strawberry mane gleaming. August followed at a distance, sitting too rigidly in his saddle, his mouth set in a grim line.

'Old August don't look too happy, does he?' Matilda said.

Jake watched Maxim rein in his pretty mare and slide elegantly down from his saddle. Matilda tossed the petticoat over the hitching rope and put her hands on her hips, ready to watch the show. Jake turned his attention to Caesar, who blinked slowly at him and pushed his face towards Jake's. Jake breathed in the thoroughbred's familiar, warm scent. He heard August approach and braced himself, hoping August's keen eyes would somehow miss the military brands that Matilda had pointed out.

But August didn't seem at all interested in the horses. He stopped beside Maxim, took off his hat, and held it up. Sunlight shone through a bullet hole in the brim.

'Look at my hat,' he snapped.

Maxim peered at the hat, smiling. 'Better than your head, isn't it, love?' she said.

'This was my granddaddy's hat, you bastard. I've had this goddamn hat since I was twelve years old, and all it takes is for you –' he pushed his finger into Maxim's faded but elegant waistcoat, '– to ruin it with your bright ideas. If those rangers weren't chasing us before, they sure will be now.'

'Oh, don't worry about it. It was dark, they won't have a clue who stole their horses. They'll probably blame it on the Comanches or the Mexicans like they always do,' Maxim said.

August stared at Maxim, disgust twisting his sun-weathered face. Jake fiddled with the buckle on Caesar's bridle and pretended he wasn't listening. He'd seen it enough times to predict how it would go — the old men would yap at each other until Jake stepped between them or took a side. He'd played the role since he was a boy: the steadfast son

who ran from one father to the other, coddling their egos, calming their anger. Whichever way it went, he could never win. He'd back up one side and the other would get sore, sulking about for a few days until a new problem appeared, and then the whole cycle would start over. And if he didn't choose at all, they'd think he was stupid, unable to make any kind of choice of his own.

August threw his reins back over the pommel of his saddle and spoke. 'We better pack up and get moving.'

'Move? We just got here!' Maxim exclaimed. 'We can't move for a few days at least, not until figure out where we're going.'

'Alright then, let's sit down and wait for the rangers to bring the firing squad. Come on, Mattie, shall we start digging our graves and save them a job?'

'Graves? They wouldn't do no funerals for us, they'd leave us to rot,' Matilda said, laughing. Jake was glad someone was amused by the old men's bickering.

'August, those rangers couldn't find their peckers with both hands. Besides, the scouts will have to report back their captain before they come after us, and that'll take them days with no horses. Do you honestly take me for a fool?' Maxim said, real anger flashing in his black eyes as he spoke. He always took offence when anybody accused him of putting their lives at risk, so the fight was bound to heat up any second. Jake glanced back at Matilda, who was watching the old men with her head tilted to the side slightly, as if observing two very interesting stags butting antlers. Jake busied himself by looking through the scouts' saddle bags. They were filled with the usual spoils — ammunition, bandages, dried meat, beans. He also found a strange pouch of herbs, a rattlesnake's tail that still rattled, and — *excellent* — a jug of moonshine. He uncorked the bottle and sniffed it.

'What have you got there, Jake?' Maxim asked, finally remembering that Jake did, in fact, exist.

'Cactus juice, I think,' Jake said.

Maxim held out his hand and Jake passed over the bottle. He looked at it thoughtfully. 'You know what, I think we'll have a little celebration tonight. Rally the troops, so to speak,' he said.

'Don't think they need much more rallyin', Maxim. They're too happy as it is,' Matilda said. She squinted over at Mika and Ivy, who were twirling

through the water. They all watched the youths for a moment, right as Mika dipped Ivy back, one hand around her slim waist, her loose hair tumbling into the water.

'To be young and in love,' Maxim said. He looked at August, who caught his eye for a second, then snorted and looked away.

'They've been running me ragged,' Matilda said.

'Oh, I hope not, Mattie. Where's everybody else? Is nobody seizing the day?' Maxim asked, and Jake couldn't help laughing. It was Maxim's upbringing that had given him his quaint way of speaking, or so he said. He'd spent the first nineteen years of his life in England, the son of an aristocrat, attending galas and balls and riding horses in the green countryside and hunting simply because he could and not because he'd starve to death if he didn't. It was a life Jake could barely even imagine, but the stories Maxim told... well, if they were true, he wouldn't mind being an aristocrat himself, even if he did find Maxim snooty at times.

'Well, Buck's on guard duty up there, and I think Eliza and Joey went off fishing.'

'Did they go far?' August asked, anxious lines creasing beside his eyes. Jake knew exactly what August felt, because he felt it too. He liked Eliza and her boy, and he worried about them in a way that he didn't need to worry about the others, who could all hold their own in a gunfight. And sure, maybe Joey reminded Jake a little of how he was when he was fifteen, coltish and desperate, trying to harden himself against the world and its men.

'They didn't take any horses, so I guess not,' Matilda said.

'I better go and find them,' August said.

'I'm sure they're fine, August. Why don't you go for a lie down? We've been up all night, and you know how that shoulder gets when you don't rest,' Maxim said, reaching out to touch August's shoulder. August shrugged him off right away.

'I can think of a million things I'd rather be doing,' August said, his voice dry, all the anger burned out of it.

'Oh, a million things? Well, write them down, then. I don't have time to listen to them now.'

Maxim prowled away, swinging the moonshine bottle by his side. Jake turned to look at August, and when their eyes met, Jake could see the

exhaustion in him. He'd aged quicker than Maxim, though they were both in their fifties. August had gone entirely grey, while Maxim's only sign of age was his impressive crow's feet; his sleek hair and moustache were as black as ever. Jake often thought that Maxim had the energy of a mountain goat, while August had become more of a sleepy cat. He was too old to be dashing about the country, following Maxim's whims. It was a wonder they'd even lived as long as they had.

'Well. I better get these horses watered before they all drop dead,' Jake said, as lightly as he could manage.

'Sure,' August said. They stood for a few long seconds, avoiding looking at each other, waiting for the other to say something. Then, Jake gathered up the horses' lead ropes and started out towards the river. He had to give the two exhausted mares a little tug before they would move, the heels of his boots digging deep into the gravel.

He was at the water's edge when August called his name. He turned and looked back.

'Don't think I didn't notice those military brands,' he said.

Jake laughed, shook his head, and walked into the water. Nothing escaped the notice of August Spring.

Sunita Nair

BEYOND FIRST IMPRESSIONS

SYNOPSIS: *Beyond First Impressions* continues the journey of Darcy and Elizabeth, whose love turned heads and rewrote expectations in *Pride and Prejudice*. But can a marriage between a man of high social standing and a free-spirited woman survive in a world that demands unwavering obedience and adherence to societal norms and conventions?

Was it an unassailable truth that life was merely a series of happy moments hemmed in by obstacles and constant worry on both sides? If anyone had asked Elizabeth Bennet this question a scant half hour before, she would have disagreed vehemently and told them with certainty, that while it was true that one would face obstacles and worries and perhaps even be plunged to the depths of despair in the pursuit of happiness, that hard-earned happiness once obtained would last. Surely what had happened in her life was undeniable evidence of that?

Approximately a year ago, Elizabeth had been one of the few women in Hertfordshire of marriageable age who was not in single-minded pursuit of acquiring a husband, simply because she did not feel that her ability to be happy depended on it. Then Darcy had walked into Sir William Lucas' party that long ago evening and her life had been changed completely. While she did not believe that a woman had to be married to be happy, she was thankful that she had met Darcy. Their path to happiness had not been smooth, but their love had triumphed, overcoming obstacles that had at times seemed insurmountable. So, long lasting happiness *was* possible.

Earlier that day, she and Jane had been almost beside themselves with happiness; they had re-enacted a childish ritual of chasing each other up the stairs and had fallen on to Elizabeth's bed still overcome with laughter. Elizabeth had remarked that Jane could bring along the framed sampler that hung over her bed, stitched with the initials J.B. — after all, Jane

Bennet would become Jane Bingley. Jane had laughed delightedly and embraced Lizzie with evident affection, saying that she had not known that such happiness was possible. They were both marrying the men they loved, who were also close friends, meaning that their long-held fear of not being able to spend much time with each other after marriage had been put to rest.

But now, the letter Elizabeth had found half-buried under the untidy pile of Jane's dresses that she had been helping to fold made her wonder whether happiness was indeed only meant to be ephemeral.

At length, Elizabeth found her voice again. 'Jane, I thought Lydia would not be attending the wedding because Wickham was unable to obtain permission to leave the regiment even for a week?'

'Yes, that is what Lydia wrote before, Lizzie. But in this letter, she did not say how he managed to secure permission since then.'

'And when did you receive this letter?'

'About – about three days ago, I think.'

'Three days ago! And you did not think that I should know about it? Why, Jane? Surely you knew that I would have an opinion about Lydia and Wickham attending the wedding, and a strong one at that.'

Elizabeth forced herself not to react to Jane's agitated state, clearly visible in the discomfort on her face and the way she was wringing her hands together. She would not allow herself to feel badly about the upset she was causing her beloved sister on the night before her wedding. There were far more important matters occupying her thoughts at present.

'Lizzie, I truly forgot to tell you about the letter, but I think you are agitating yourself for no reason. Lydia and Wickham will attend the wedding and perhaps spend a day or two at Longbourn and then be on their way. Lydia writes that she wants to share the joy with her family. Surely you can understand that?'

Elizabeth raised her eyes heavenward. As far as she was concerned, the very notion that Lydia wanted to be here with family was an idea that could not be entertained in earnest. It was far more likely that her eagerness had more to do with her wanting to be the centre of attention as she showed off her latest gown. Or perhaps it was so that she could lord it over her sisters, claiming to have superior knowledge as the only one amongst them who was already married. She shook her head, her feelings

somewhere between vexation and an almost weary acceptance; there was scarcely anything that Lydia could do or say to surprise her these days.

‘We have to think about Mama, Lizzie. Mama really wants Lydia to be here for my wedding.’ As if sensing that her words had done nothing to lessen Elizabeth’s ire, Jane placed a soothing hand on her sister’s shoulder, putting a temporary halt to her frantic pacing. ‘I know Lydia is silly and her actions in the past have sometimes caused us embarrassment, but please remember that she was young and impressionable at that time –’

‘But old enough to want to go off to Gretna Green and get married!’

‘Oh Lizzie, that is all in the past – I am certain that she is more mature now that she is married. Besides, I am certain that Lydia misses Mama too; they have been apart for some time now. You know how close they have always been. They will be so happy to be reunited!’

While Elizabeth had found little in Jane’s concerns about Lydia with which she could agree, she had to admit the truth of Jane’s last statement. On the odd chance that Lydia was indeed eager to see any one of them, it would be their mother’s company that she sought. Being of an equal temperament to Lydia and almost as silly, there was no doubt that Mrs Bennet would fuss over her youngest daughter while at the same time sharing her fascination with the various styles of gowns and millinery worn by the ladies at Jane’s wedding.

‘Yes, the both of them will be overjoyed,’ said Elizabeth, rolling her eyes in exasperation as she thought about the behaviour of her mother whenever her youngest sister was about. ‘Mama will be so happy that she will indulge every silly whim of Lydia’s and be equally silly herself. It should not surprise me if their silliness becomes the talk of the town. Or perhaps everyone will be talking about the money that Wickham owes the tradesmen in Meryton. Either way, rest assured that people will not be talking about your wedding Jane!’

‘Oh Lizzie! Surely, that will not happen.’

Elizabeth resumed her pacing, as a thousand thoughts fought for primacy in her mind. Should she tell Darcy? How would he take the news? She was sure that he would not welcome Wickham’s presence at his dearest friend’s wedding. More importantly, it would be so very unfair to Georgiana that her first meeting with Wickham after all these years would be in full sight of all those gathered for the wedding. She had

to find an occasion to tell Darcy, even if that meant she had to face his displeasure.

‘Telling Darcy will only make the situation more miserable for you, Lizzie.’

Elizabeth halted mid-stride. It was uncanny how well Jane knew her, sensing her exact concerns just by looking at her troubled countenance.

‘Did you hear me, Lizzie? If he asks, just say you knew nothing about it.’

Elizabeth turned sharply to face her sister. ‘Are you suggesting that I lie to him? There are no more secrets between us than there are between Bingley and yourself. I cannot lie to him. I *will* not.’

‘Do not say anything to him. Remember that you are not yet wed so you are not obliged to tell him everything. Anyway, it cannot be as bad as all that. After all, it was Darcy who got Lydia and Wickham married. Surely if he so thoroughly disapproved of Wickham he would not have done so.’

‘Jane Bennet, surely you do not believe what you are saying. We have already spoken about this at length. If Darcy had not arranged their marriage, Lydia would have been ruined, and our family name would have been forever besmirched. It does not mean that he approves of Wickham, far from it. There was scarcely any other choice in the matter. In any case, what of Georgiana? The only reason why Darcy gave her permission to attend was because I assured him that Wickham would not attend the wedding. You know what Wickham did to Georgiana so how do you think she will feel –’ Elizabeth stopped speaking, her brow furrowed as she noticed how pale Jane had become.

She took Jane’s hand in hers, hoping to offer some measure of comfort. ‘What is it, Jane?’

‘Poor Georgiana! How could I have forgotten about her?’ Seeing Jane with her head bowed despondently, Elizabeth wanted to say something to ease her distress, but found that she simply could not find the words. At length, Jane lifted her head, and though her face still bore evidence of strain, there was a glimmer of hope in her eyes. ‘Lizzie, we have to stop Georgiana from coming to the wedding. That is the only way we can resolve this. We should send word to Pemberley at once.’

‘Send word to Pemberley? Your wedding is in less than twelve hours,

Jane! Georgiana has already made the trip from Pemberley — she arrived at Netherfield Park yesterday — so it is too late now. You should have told me when you first received the letter so that I could have at least warned Darcy in advance.’

The brief lightness in Jane’s face faded at once. ‘I am truly sorry, Lizzie. I was entirely occupied with all the wedding preparations, sorting through my belongings and instructing Mrs Hill on what to pack that I forgot to mention this to you.’

Elizabeth remained silent, moving across the room to stand near the window. For once she was grateful for the ill-fitted windowpane, the cool air seeping through the gaps providing a brief but welcome respite to the agitation stirring within her. Her eyes fell on Jane’s wedding gown, which was draped across the chair near the window. It was in the softest shade of pink and just imagining Jane in it brought a smile to Elizabeth’s lips, despite all the turmoil in her mind. Her sister would undoubtedly be the most beautiful woman in the church tomorrow.

Her smile wavered as another thought crossed her mind. Tomorrow was Jane’s wedding day and instead of spending their last night together recalling with affection all the happier moments that they had spent together, they were instead squandering their time arguing. She knew the fault was mainly hers, but as much as she wanted to forget about Lydia and Wickham and enjoy their time together, merely contemplating on what would happen when they made their appearance tomorrow made her uneasy. Should she warn Darcy? Would she be able to do it before they arrived?

She was startled when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Turning slightly to face Jane, she was glad to see that her sister’s pallor was much improved.

‘We will do everything we can to keep Wickham away from Georgiana, Lizzie. I am certain that we can ensure that they have no occasion to speak to each other at all.’

‘I wish it were that simple, Jane. But Darcy –’

‘Yes, well Darcy need not speak to Wickham either. The church will be full of people so he will have no need to speak to him should he wish not to.’

An unrefined sound escaped Elizabeth’s lips. ‘*Should* he wish not to? Have you taken leave of your senses, Jane? Of course he would have

no wish to speak to Wickham. He would not wish to have anything to do with either of them! But at this point, it is Georgiana that I am more worried about; I cannot imagine what will happen when she sees Wickham, especially when she is not expecting him to attend at all.' She stepped away from the window, her fingers twisting in her skirts as she began to pace again.

'Lizzie, I know you are worried about Georgiana but please think of Lydia too. After all, I am the first of her sisters to be married and she is understandably eager to be a part of the celebrations. Also, since she is unlikely to be welcome at your wedding, especially if she wants to attend together with Wickham, my wedding is her only chance until Mary or Kitty get married and that will not be for some time yet. Bingley and I have no objections to her and Wickham attending the wedding, so please just let it be.'

Elizabeth moved to stand in front of Jane. 'Bingley has no objections to Wickham attending the wedding? Is that true, Jane? Have you told Bingley?' She had to strain to hear Jane's answer.

'Well, no, I – I have not, but –'

'Oh Jane, you know Bingley would never approve because –'

'Of course my dear Charles will not approve, because he has such high regard for Darcy that he will do and say anything to please him even if he is not of the same mind!'

'Jane, I think you do Bingley a great injustice by –'

'Please, Lizzie, we both know that I speak the truth. Have you forgotten how quickly Charles left Netherfield Park when Darcy told him that my regard for him did not equal his? Charles told me later that he did not feel the same way but agreed because Darcy was very adamant. We suffered on account of Darcy's interference, Lizzie.'

Elizabeth closed her eyes briefly. The sentiments that Jane had just voiced were exactly what she had expressed to Darcy when he had first proposed. She opened her eyes reluctantly, looking at a point beyond Jane's shoulder. 'Well – well, the present situation is – is entirely different. I am certain Bingley would not approve.'

'Charles is a grown man, so he should be able to make up his own mind. But he simply cannot because Darcy will not stop imposing his will on him.'

'Jane! How could you say such a thing?'

'I am sorry, Lizzie, I did not mean to hurt you by bringing up the past. I am merely trying to manage this unpleasant situation as best as we can, but you are so determined to be unhappy, insisting that nothing can be done.'

'I am just thinking of Darcy, Jane. Georgiana is his sister after all –'

'And Lydia is our sister, and she wants to attend my wedding and – and I want her there as well.'

Elizabeth saw the unmistakable sheen of tears in Jane's eyes just before she turned away and walked towards the door.

'Jane, wait –'

Jane's steps faltered, but she did not turn around. 'I am going to Mama's room. She has something belonging to our grandmother that she wants me to wear for the wedding.'

* * *

The room was silent, almost uneasily so. The only sound was the occasional rustle as Elizabeth turned the pages of the book she had been trying to read for the past half hour. In truth, she turned the pages without awareness, her thoughts far away from the words on the page. *Where was Jane?* The hour was late, and she needed to be awake at dawn to get ready for the wedding.

Elizabeth's nose wrinkled involuntarily at the smell of soot mixed with another sharper scent. It took but a moment before she recognised the scent of roses. It was not a scent she particularly favoured — she was more partial to lavender — but roses had always been Jane's favourite, and she had complained to Jane on more than one occasion about how it lingered on all her clothes and scarves. But she found herself taking in a deep breath, now finding the scent strangely comforting. Soon the room would no longer smell of roses.

Giving up any pretence of reading, she put the book on her lap and looked around the room that she had shared with Jane all her life, her eyes finally falling on Jane's bed. The coverlet had been pushed back to accommodate the piles of Jane's belongings that had yet to make their way into the open trunk at the foot of the bed. The rest of the room was almost

empty of Jane's belongings, save for a stray glove near the hearth and a single ribbon hanging from her bedpost. Tomorrow, Jane's bed would be empty, with the coverlet drawn up over her pillows to keep the dust away; her trunks would be packed and on their way to her new home, and Jane herself would no longer be a part of the Bennet household. While there was no doubt that they would see each other often enough, it would never be quite the same again.

Unwilling to think about life without Jane, Elizabeth snatched the book from her lap and turned to a page without looking. She tried to read but the words seemed blurred. Leaning towards the table at the side of her bed, she adjusted the candle with small, impatient movements, sure that the poor light was to blame — but even after several moments, the words remained stubbornly indistinct. She snapped the book shut with trembling fingers as the first tear fell, unbidden.

The sudden creaking of the floorboards just outside the door announced Jane's return. Elizabeth bent quickly to the candle to extinguish the flame, not wanting Jane to see that she had been crying. She watched quietly as the door opened. Jane stood at the entrance, unmoving, almost as if she was reluctant to enter the room. Elizabeth wished that she could tell what Jane was thinking but the light from the hallway obscured her features, leaving only her silhouette visible. After several long moments, Jane stepped inside and closed the door behind her.

Elizabeth's gaze remained fixed on Jane as her sister moved about the room quietly. She wanted desperately to apologise for their earlier disagreement, but she feared that in speaking, her words might not be well received and would stir fresh discord between them.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

NON-FICTION

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Cleo Mace is a writer based in Manchester. Her fiction has been published in the BENDER zine and her non-fiction writing has featured in TRANS JOY NOW!, an art project presented at Contact Theatre.

Cole Sliwinski

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Cole Sliwinski is a writer from a lot of places, but mostly Dublin, Ireland. These days, he's been writing about group projects, language barriers, and bad sex.

Elizabeth Salusbury

lizzie.salusbury00@btinternet.com

Elizabeth Salusbury is a writer from Oxford with an undergraduate degree in English Literature. For this MA in Creative Writing, she has explored modules in poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction, and is focusing on short stories at the moment. Some say she's trying out new stuff, others say she is just confused.

Yi Li

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Prince of China. Earthly fairy. Descendant of Nüwa. The most undefinable being since Pangu split the sky from the Earth. Former TV programme director, creative producer, and (still) an LGBTQ+ activist. The next greatest queer novel will be written by me.

Yingxin Miao

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Yingxin Miao is a writer from Huzhou, China, with a focus on stories about Chinese women. She is currently debating whether to return home and find a job entirely unrelated to writing.

POETRY

Amber Souch

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Amber Souch is a writer exploring women's experiences of sexuality and desire. Her writing challenges the boundary between poetry and prose, with strong narrative undercurrents emerging in her poetry. Queerness and body horror characterise her work, and she is currently working on a narrative poetry collection framed within a macabre circus world.

Astrid Meyer

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Astrid Meyer (b. 1999) is British/Danish and grew up largely in Cambridge. Prior to completing her Master's degree in Creative Writing, she completed a Bachelor's degree in English Literature at the University of Manchester. She hopes to pursue a career in poetry editing and to publish her debut collection in the coming years.

Dylan Stewart

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Dylan Stewart is an unemployed layabout from Kingston. He's attempting to find a way to talk about the disintegration of the world before it disappears completely. He hasn't found it yet.

Ellie Grant

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Ellie Grant is a neuroqueer poet. She takes inspiration from childhood, the pockets of green in her local London, and the pockets of dark in urban places where green things tend to grow. She placed second in the The University of Manchester Micropoetry Competition in 2024 and was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize 2025.

Rhiannon Price

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Rhiannon Price is a neurodivergent poet, fiction writer, and PR freelancer exploring all things bodily, feminine, and freaky. With a BA (Hons) in English with Creative Writing, her first poetry collection 'Cautions in the Pursuit of Womanliness' and current projects seek to dismember the female experience from womb to tomb.

Samantha Graham

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Samantha is a poet from Bury. In 2022, she won the Miriam Allot Poetry Prize while completing her Bachelor's degree at the University of Liverpool. She is currently, and expects she always will be, based in her home city of Manchester, where she works as a freelance English Editor.

Tom Pyle

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Tom Pyle is a writer from the North West interested in places and our relationships with them. He is currently based in Zagreb and is working towards a first poetry collection. He lists George Szirtes, Lorna Goodison, and Wallace Stevens as influences.

NOVEL EXTRACTS

Alexandria Mowrey

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Alexandria Mowrey is a writer from St. Augustine, Florida. She's spent her life trying to make a career out of being creative. So, between a Bachelor's in Film Production and this Master's in Creative Writing, her chances are improving! Her Anthology submission, *Matron Saints*, is an excerpt from a novel of the same name.

Anne Boyd Rioux

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Anne Boyd Rioux is a former English professor from New Orleans and a biographer specializing in American women writers. She is the author of three non-fiction books, two published by W. W. Norton, and the popular Substack newsletter, 'Audacious Women, Creative Lives.' *A War of Her Own* is her first novel.

Jill Craig

jillrc166@gmail.com

Jill is a secondary teacher working on her first novel. Much of her fiction draws on the jagged coastline and ruggedness of Northern Ireland, though she has also lived in Scotland, France, and Greece. Her fiction is also woven through with her interest in relationship dynamics, be that familial, romantic, or platonic.

Olivia Gledhill

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Olivia Gledhill is an aspiring novelist and screenwriter from Greater Manchester. She writes historical fiction that explores the relationship between wilderness and civilisation, and humanity's destruction of the natural world. She grew up loving cowboy movies, so she started writing her own.

Sunita Nair

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Sunita Nair is a Singaporean history teacher who writes historical fiction focusing on female agency and courage in the face of insurmountable odds. While her current work examines marriage, class, and constraint in the Georgian era, her forthcoming projects delve into forgotten histories from Southeast Asia during World War II.

2025 ANTHOLOGY TEAM

*Managing Editors
and Production Team*

Samantha Graham
Tom Pyle
Dylan Stewart

Design

David Webb

Cover Art

Kate Partington

Marketing

Benjamin Thomas

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Especially due to our core editorial team being somewhat smaller than those of previous years, we could not have completed this book without the help of the people listed below. Our sincere thanks are thus given as follows:

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to David Webb, for his support in designing the book;
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to John McAuliffe and Michael Schmitt, for coordinating with us in establishing the new Poetry Prize and offering their support;
to Pdraig Regan, for being the 2025 judge of the aforementioned Poetry Prize;
and to Kate Partington, for creating the Anthology cover art.

Finally, but most importantly, our thanks go out to each and every graduating student who submitted their brilliant writing for publication in this collection.

This is the fifteenth volume of *The Manchester Anthology*, and with it we are pleased to introduce the CNW Carcanet Poetry Prize — a prize to be awarded, in association with Carcanet Press, to an outstanding poet featured in *The Manchester Anthology*, as judged by the Burgess Writer Fellow for poetry within the Centre for New Writing.

Mirroring the long-standing annual prize awarded to prose writers, we hope that this new poetry award will continue alongside future volumes of *The Manchester Anthology* to uplift poets within the Centre for New Writing and encourage them to publish their work.

The first winner will be announced in October 2025.

— *Samantha, Dylan, and Tom*

THE MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY 2025

Anne Boyd Rioux - Jill Craig - Ría Fay-Berquist - Olivia Gledhill -
Samantha Graham - Ellie Grant - Anastasiia Lebedenko - Yi Li -
Cleo Mace - Astrid Meyer - Yingxin Miao - Alexandria Mowrey -
Sunita Nair - Rhiannon Price - Tom Pyle - Elizabeth Salusbury -
Cole Sliwinski - Amber Souch - Dylan Stewart

Edited by *Samantha Graham, Tom Pyle, and Dylan Stewart*
With a foreword by *Jason Allen-Paisant*

* * *

The final Roman Emperor working in a pub in Headley. Reflections on the weight of silence amidst the war in Ukraine. A retelling of a classic Chinese love story in a disenchanted world. A poem from the perspective of a chicken with clipped wings. History and dystopia. Peace and violence. The today, and the tomorrow.

To quote Jason Allen-Paisant, what unites the works in this Anthology is not genre, or style, or even subject matter, but a common insistence that life is lived under pressure.

Between queer exploration, climate change, Long COVID and long-lost love, you'll find it all within this collection of the best work from the 2025 graduates of The University of Manchester's Creative Writing MA programme.

* * *

'This is a book of adventures, into what we know and into what we imagine'
John McAuliffe

'These are works of daring and brio by students of marked talent and flair'
Vona Groarke

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