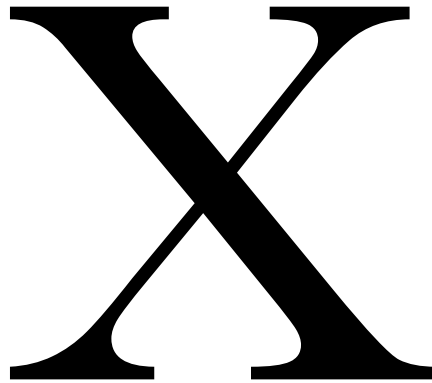




X

THE MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY

The University of Manchester Anthology



Louisa Ashton
Emma Bosworth
Cherelle Findley
Tom Guy
Madeline Hoffman
Cheryl Kilvington
Thomas Martin
Helen Mayall
Osman Mohamed
Dipika Mummery
Jennifer Nuttall
Shekina Rose
Francesca Weekes
Daniel Whelan
Joshua Wicks
Brynne Montgomery Koning
Charlie Wrigg

‘A shimmering slice of talent.’

BETH UNDERDOWN

‘The writers of tomorrow are in this anthology, today — it’s a joy and a privilege to hear their voices at this early stage of their writing lives.’

KAMILA SHAMSIE

‘This brilliantly varied anthology asks questions about difference and belonging, about the body and about ideas, about joy and shame and the sometimes comic, sometimes excruciating ways in which we humans discover who we are. It is an uncomplicated pleasure to read such a set of writers, and to admire how their striking new images and stories emerge.’

JOHN McAULIFFE

Centre
for **New**
Writing

X: The Manchester Anthology

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Foreword

Ian McGuire

and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating

In 'East Coker', the second part of his great poem 'Four Quartets', T.S. Eliot offers us this view of writing as a gruelling and almost impossible task: an endless attempt to grasp a truth which remains always just out of reach. The writer in the passage quoted above is a weary and tormented figure unable to abandon their calling yet at the same time weighed down always with a sense of their own incapacity and belatedness.

There are particular reasons and contexts which help to explain Eliot's gloominess here, most notably the Second World War which was still going on as he wrote, but there is also, to broaden things out a little, a sense in which he speaks for any serious writer when a particular mood or problem besets them. Writing sometimes *does* feel like an exhausting and impossible, or almost impossible, task, yet a task which can't simply be abandoned nonetheless. Learning to write well involves, inevitably, plenty of suffering and confusion along the way, plenty of moments when it feels like you really don't know what you're doing or why you're doing it. And that is (to use a rather more contemporary phrase) not a bug but a feature. It's an inevitable part of the process of going from an empty page to some new object made of words that you can feel at least a little bit pleased with.

No doubt all the writers in this anthology have had days or weeks over the last eighteen months or so when they felt their equipment was indeed pretty shabby and the inarticulate was putting up a particular strong defence, when, as Eliot says elsewhere in the same poem, *Words strain/Crack and sometimes break, under the burden/Under the tension, slip, slide, perish*, but they have all, as the work collected here amply testifies, managed in one way or another to push through those doubts and difficulties and to create something fresh and new that didn't exist before. That they have done so is testament to their individual determination certainly, but also, I'm certain, to the great support and encouragement they have offered to each other both inside and outside the seminar room. Joining the Masters programme here at Manchester means, among other things, joining a community of writers who are all pushing in the same general direction, all trying in their different ways to learn and improve.

In 'Four Quartets' Eliot talks in rather grand terms of a long tradition of great poets and great poetry which he wishes to be a part of, but what he says of that tradition may also be applied in more modest, but equally meaningful ways to the students who have contributed



Cannibal

Jennifer Nuttall

Sometimes, though not often enough for it to be of any great concern, I think about eating you. Not because of anything you may have done wrong, and not in the fun way that the rise of your eyebrow tells me you are already thinking of – this poem is not a metaphor for sex. I think about eating you. I consider whether you would be best trussed like a turkey, butter rubbed into the tundra of your skin, or hung in a dry room until you matured like good beef, then carved and filleted and all your less desirable parts boiled and baked into pies. I think about eating you. I try to decide which fork is the correct one to use and whether I should serve you with red or white wine. The etiquette guides don't cover this. You would be an occasion for tablecloths, freshly aired and pressed and smoothed out across the table ready to receive you. I imagine the taste of your tongue served on focaccia with just a smear of mustard and maybe watercress. I picture myself pushing the heel of my palm into your chest until it cracks and splays you, butterflied to roast more evenly. Maybe a herb rub. Maybe a stew. You could be both the meat and the stock... and the fat of the dumplings! I think about eating you. I measure chest freezers and ovens online and have picked the perfect carving knife. The pantry is stocked with all the accompaniments I think would suit you best. I have even invested in a lobster bib. But of course, I don't eat you. I prepare this for you. I open my own veins and slice my fingers, marbled and paper-thin. And you devour me.

The Night Nurse

Brynne Montgomery Koning

Mae Vogel sat in Room 14 of Archdale Hospice, perched on a white metal chair, clutching the hand of a dead man. The room was dimly lit by a single fluorescent tube, which flickered occasionally. There was little warmth in the institutional pink walls and spotted linoleum, and the window looking out to the garden was the inky black of night-time away from city lights. There was a red knitted tissue box cosy and a battered copy of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* on the bedside table, but these did not amount to much of a homey touch.

Mae felt some sorrow for the passing of patients. It was her custom to sit with her dead for five minutes, hand in hand, before tucking the patient's arm under the blanket and calling for an orderly. Mr Maloney was emblematic of the majority of Archdale residents. When the knowledge and skills of the medical field hit a hill they could not summit, the patients were sent here, where what was left of their life was managed by doctors, nurses, and orderlies. A waiting room for death.

The orderly on duty most nights was Habib. He was a tall, compassionate man who moved so quietly he frequently startled staff by appearing in what they were certain only a moment ago had been empty air. He had been assigned permanently to the night shift after only a week on the job. Habib preferred it, as he was able to care for his two-year-old son and his daughter, aged four, who only had half days at school. Mae liked Habib's quiet way. She generally didn't startle.

Mae tidied the room before pressing the large blue button that would summon Habib. A moment after she'd settled back into her chair Mae felt Habib's large hand on her shoulder. Though only now aware of his presence, she simply turned to face him and announced, 'Mr Maloney has passed.'

Habib nodded but did not look to the body. Instead he watched Nurse Mae's face with an expression of concern. I must look pale, Mae thought. He crouched down to meet her eyes, his hands coming up to rest on her shoulders.

'Are you okay?' he asked. 'Why don't you have a cup of tea in the break-room? Have a small rest. I'll help Mr Maloney.'

'No, he's my patient, I'll see him off properly.' She looked away, toward Mr Maloney, distancing herself from Habib. She reached up to pat the hand on her shoulder, thanking him for his concern.

'As you like,' he said and released her, moving to uncover Mr Maloney.

They worked slowly, carefully removing the medical tape from his skin, disconnecting all of the machines that had monitored his vitals. Mr Maloney had a Foley catheter and a PICC line which they left in, to be removed at the funeral home after the body had been examined, before being made ready for – as per Mr Maloney's wishes – cremation.

The idea of death without trace had appeal for Mae. Mr Maloney's body would be reduced to ash and scattered to the wind. There would be nothing tangible left for the living or the dead to hold onto. Mae felt the absence of life in Mr Maloney keenly – the lack of

soul. It was a corpse to her now: though it was warm to the touch, the flesh still malleable, its limbs easy to articulate. When they had finished, Habib took the empty vessel away, leaving Mae behind to finish the paperwork that came with the end of life at Archdale. It wouldn't be long before she was filing it away and leaving a fluorescent sticky note for Mary, on the day shift, to contact next of kin. She had completed more than half of the forms the previous day.

Mae did not think herself alone in Room 14; Mr Maloney was not gone, she felt his presence. Not in memory or in her heart, but as a spirit attached to her, clinging to her own. These spirits were the reason she attended their funerals, the reason she spoke to the people they left behind. This was her duty of care and her release. When Mae left this world, she had it written down that everything – from her flesh, to her desk, to each and every frilly white nightgown – was to be burned. Those cultures that burned the dead's possessions, even homes, had the right way of thinking. Much more sense than those others that hoarded treasures around the body to tie the dead in place. Brigit called that talk nonsense, and had always pushed Mae to step away from death; she said the dead had better things to do. Mae knew better than to listen; she knew Brigit had just exorcised her own ghost in a different way.

* * *

Dawn had come hours earlier and the sun was strong in the sky by the time Mae crested the hill at the end of the long gravel drive to her home among the trees. How much would she sleep with the world so bright? The clouds that usually rolled in mid-morning were nowhere to be seen. At least the snow was melting. She ought to go buy better curtains. She didn't dare use wax plugs for her ears for fear days would pass before she woke again. It was an anxiety she had developed in her late middle age; it kept her from sleep too, or perhaps she had just lost the trick of falling away from herself. It did not matter. There were never enough hours to do all she wanted to do, so these sleepless days were more help than hindrance.

Mae always spent an extra hour in Room 6 after her shift concluded. A room where the only sounds were from visitors, the hum of machines and false breath. It was where the partially alive slept their time away in a state between worlds, comatose. The staff of the Archdale let her be in that first hour of their working day: caring for other patients, preparing morning meals, and assigning tasks. They completed their necessary checks and duties for Room 6 after Nurse Mae had left the premises.

Mae killed the engine of the battered white pickup, grabbed her purse and entered the house, calling a greeting to Brigit, who sat watchful in the small watercolour portrait that hung above the upstairs landing. This house had been their home for thirty-eight years. The Vogel siblings had purchased it together. The deposit money was cobbled together from an inheritance Mae and her brother, Adam, had received from their grandparents – Adam had got the larger share. When he had come to Mae, she had offered her share, along with the small sum of money she had in her savings, to help purchase the property. It had been Brigit, Adam's wife, who had found the place, and Brigit who insisted Mae move in along with them. So when moving day came, they were a family of four: Mae, Adam and Brigit, and their son Eddie, who wasn't much good at walking yet. The house was a small, wood-clad, three-bedroom they'd painted blue, its tall windows trimmed white. It came with a large garage they'd filled with little-used camping equipment, and bikes whose gears were now rusted over. The house's other selling points had been a sizable piece of land; its relative seclusion, the treehouse observable from the kitchen sink window; and a small outbuilding that was converted into an artist's studio for Brigit. It had emptied out over the years, losing all of its residents except one. Mae did not love the house but felt inextricably linked to the place. So much so that she planned to die here, in the second bedroom, her window open to the ocean breeze.

After hanging up her coat and purse, Mae went and sat at the broad wooden desk and retrieved her journal from its secret drawer. She still thought of it as Adam's desk, though he had been gone for nearly three decades now. He and his crew had taken the Sally Anne out to check the lobster traps and a storm had blown in. Mae and Brigit had been listening to CBC Radio 2 over lunch when the emergency news broadcast had aired. They had known about the storm. It wasn't supposed to hit Nova Scotia, but it had suddenly veered westwards. When it hit the coast that afternoon many were caught out, and many, including her brother, lost their lives to the Atlantic.

Brigit had not taken it well, for all that her life was better without him. Adam had not been the good sort of husband, as Mae judged such things. After he died Brigit lay in bed for days, and would not touch her paints. After weeks of consoling and cajoling, Mae took Brigit by the hand and dragged her out of bed. They would clear the house of Adam. They gathered all the things that were his and brought them out to the yard until a large mound formed. They splashed his whiskey on the pile, with a good dose of kerosene to help things along, and set it alight. Then they drank the rest of the whiskey between them. Eddie had come home from school to find his mother and aunt drunk on the porch swing and the final embers of their bonfire smouldering on the lawn.

The burning had been a partial success. Brigit came back to herself enough to paint. It would be many more years before she shook off her spectre enough to emerge and fully return to the woman Mae had known. The desk remained because the two women were not strong enough to lift it together, and dragging had left deep gouges in the pine floor.

Now the desk was where Mae came to write: recording the lives and deaths of those patients who passed in her mercy. Nothing so formulaic or linear as the official patient files. She saved scraps of people in her book: little innocuous details, anecdotes, secrets whispered to her listening ear; the names of relatives and friends who cared for them, and those who did not; and the traumas and pain that had brought them to her. It was cheating, against her own rules and judgement, but this collection was precious to her; and it had not yet caught the attention of their spirits.

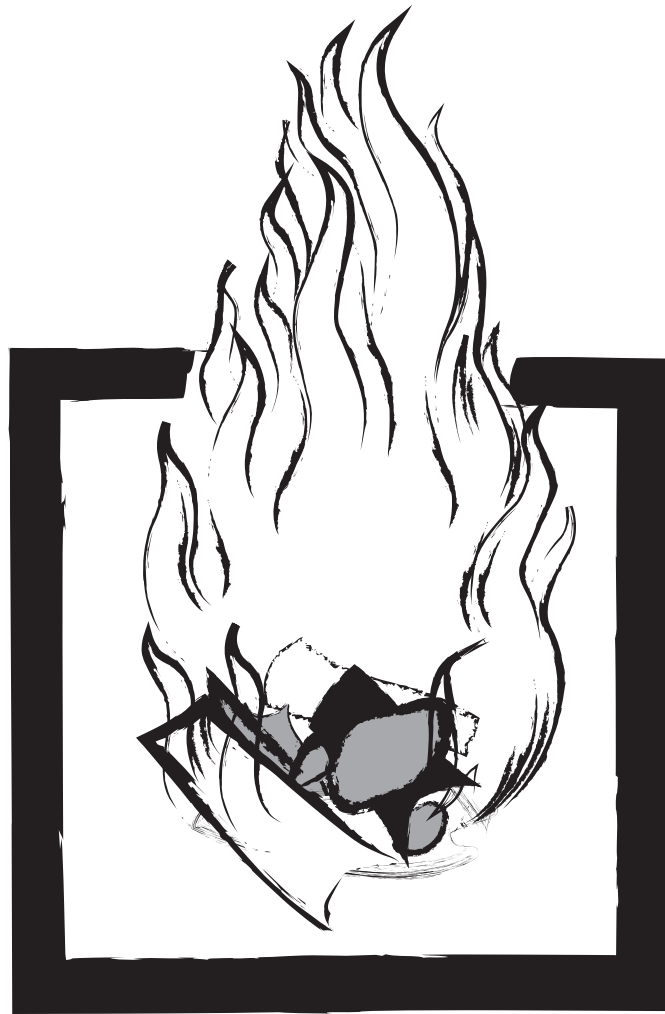
Mr Maloney had been something of a favourite and had filled a number of the pages. The last entry was from a week ago Monday. She had given him a little extra morphine to ease the pain in his head. Mr Maloney found himself able and willing to talk. He spoke of his regret that he had such a poor relationship with his daughter, Susan. His wife had died when Susan was twelve and he had drawn away from her. He said he spoke to her often, but only about the grandchildren. He felt he barely knew his own daughter. There was so much hurt there, he'd said it was worse now that he was dying.

Mae had not suggested he try and fix it, as things like that were not fixed. They could be overcome, possibly made new, but that was difficult to do when one person was hundreds of kilometres away and the other confined to a bed. Instead Mae reminded him of his grandchildren, of the video calls he received weekly. Mr Maloney smiled and shared proudly that he'd had a call nearly every day for a week. The oldest child, a girl named Alice, had received an iPad for her birthday and was taking full advantage of her grandfather's attention.

Mae listened to him as he recounted dance recitals, and the time the children had stuffed their orange cat into dolls clothes, presenting it to him proudly. The irate animal had hung there in a pink tutu and jacket trying unsuccessfully to squirm from Alice's grasp. When Mr Maloney had exhausted himself, Mae reached for the book on his bedside table. He will reach the end of these pages, she thought. Then finding her place, she resumed Verne's tale of a fantastic underwater world to distract him enough for sleep.

At her desk Mae wrote her last entry for Mr Maloney. About how he had died

painlessly, which would no doubt be a comfort to his family. She hoped his daughter Susan would have the wake in Lunenburg, where he had lived all his life.



Mae passed the remainder of the day in a fitful sleep. Her mind would not settle. She was drifting awake again when the old rotary phone rang, its noisy jangle filling the house, demanding attention. Mae did not hurry to answer; the only people who called the landline now were telemarketers and the bank.

‘Vogel residence,’ Mae said.

‘Hi Aunt Mae, it’s Ed.’

The voice did not match the name in Mae’s mind. ‘Eddie?’ The child’s name fell out of Mae’s mouth to her surprise. He sounded so much like his father. ‘I’m glad you called. How are you?’ This was so far from expected that Mae found her emotions confused, but she did have enough presence of mind to feign excitement.

‘I’m good. I’m calling because I’m in Maine this week and I want to come up on Saturday. Are you around this weekend?’

What an absurd question, Mae thought. She was not the amorphous type of person who would suddenly change the habits of a lifetime and begin going away on weekend trips, and besides, she would not leave Brigit.

‘This Saturday? Is everything alright?’ asked Mae. Ed did not just drop by the house.

‘Yes, everything is fine. It’s just some news.’

‘Oh. Good news I hope?’ Mae moved to sit at the kitchen table preparing herself for a story.

‘Yes. It involves another guest who arrives on Sunday from California.’

‘A guest? Ed, what is going on?’ Mae let go of the false cheer and let her frustration colour her voice. Where had he come by this coyness? Mae thought as she chewed the cracked flesh of her lip and tasted blood. Mae didn’t like strangers in their house.

‘Really it’s nothing bad. It’s my partner, Samantha.’

Mae had a vague memory of phone calls during Ed’s last visit to the house. Was it the same girl? That had been more than three years ago, and Mae had not paid much attention. If she had been a different sort of woman she might have blamed her indifference on that week’s proximity to Brigit’s collapse. All the pain, anxiety, decisions and things to be done that had come along with it. Not in her right mind, which some would say was perfectly understandable. But Mae had never paid any attention to Eddie’s friends or the girls he went out with unless there was trouble. And he rarely, if ever, brought them to the house.

‘Is Samantha your girlfriend?’ Mae asked.

‘My fiancée, Aunt Mae, I was supposed to tell you in person. I’m getting married in June.’ The silence on the line stretched uncomfortably long before Ed’s voice came in again, ‘You’re the only family I have.’

‘That’s not the truth. You shouldn’t –’

‘You are.’

Mae itched to say a dozen things or more but knew they would be no use; there were things she ought to say instead. ‘Congratulations! I can’t wait to meet her.’

Mae’s eyes were drawn to Brigit, in the portrait on the kitchen wall. There were nine of them. One for every room in the house. There had been ten, but Eddie had objected to the one they’d hung in his bedroom. It had been the first, and not long after he’d lost his father. The kitchen portrait was an ode to Arcimboldo; a blonde woman assembled out of produce with spiral pasta hair; an image constructed in acrylic paint and layers of coloured paper, contained in a birch frame. The woman sat in judgement of Mae, and Mae had no defence. She’d sought no connection with her nephew and these were the consequences of that separate life: unknown relations and sudden visitations.

Your Guide to Self-Organisation

Cheryl Kilvington

The years cannot help themselves: irresistible
must be the temptation for a life to turn into things. Cupboards,
chests of drawers, shelves are all at breaking point. My bedroom floor: uncrossable.
I excavate a dozen seed catalogues, postcards, lists of shade-loving perennials, tins
of keys for locks I have no memory of possessing, *Endgame* (marked up for me as Nell),
a menu for Caesars, notes in my own hand-writing — cryptically up-beat.
While I was not looking, my belongings have bred. The guru in the book you
once lent me, tells it straight: clutter is a symptom of a deranged mind.

In the attic, badly-taken photographs have broken loose: small land-
slides of the discarded but kept. In this, your eyes are closed, in another
you are looking the wrong way. I sift through the out-of-focus,
the overexposed, the heavy-on-fog, and retrieve your silhouette.
The book is resolute: failures must go. Even so. Even so
I cannot part with your image in any grade of light.

Instead

Osman Mohamed

My bastard of a brother is getting married in two days' time.

I know, I know. What a hideous word to use. *Married*. Why on earth would anyone get married?

He's the one to answer the front door of my mother's flat, wearing a linen shirt, even though it's autumn, and shapeless blue jeans. We don't hug, nor do we shake hands, and I brace myself for all the vacuous small talk of a hospital waiting room.

'Hello,' he says completely impassively. He comes to just below my shoulder and seems to grow wider each time I see him. His eyes are fixed at a point to my left. 'How's everything?'

'Good, yeah,' I reply. He nods and leads the way to the living room.

I live about two hours from my mother's flat. As soon as I could, I moved across the city. I try to visit every few months; on a Friday afternoon because that's when my brother is praying at the local mosque. He still lives at home, you see – he's twenty-five, five years younger than me, and still living here – so I try to visit when he's out of the house, to avoid him at all costs.

No such luck today. It's a Thursday and I've had to take two days off work because, as mentioned, my bastard brother is getting married this weekend. It's such an effort. I'm nursing a colossal hangover from work drinks and the old, teenage feeling of hiding it from my mother is returning to me. I try to hold the stale sour smell in, to keep my mouth shut; keeping my mouth shut is probably good advice for me to follow today, anyway.

In the living room my brother sits on the sofa beside his fiancée, Samira. They both face the bulk of my mother who is laughing her familiar throaty, choking laugh whilst Samira giggles along appreciatively. They quiet down as I enter.

'Ali,' I hear them say together. They hug me, one after the other, my mother wiping leftover tears of laughter. I sit in the empty, straight-backed wooden chair. The silence blankets us. After a while my mother (who else?) breaks it.

'This is nice, isn't it,' she says rather uselessly, in an oddly formal tone. Has the phrase 'this is nice' ever successfully removed awkwardness from a room? '... Two more days,' she continues, feeling her way through the cold atmosphere, her hands in her lap and her back erect.

It's difficult to explain my mother to others. She still lives as though it's the early eighties, still irons napkins and handwashes handkerchiefs. Even today, even though we're going nowhere special, she's dressed as if for the mosque on Eid, wearing a long, colourful, flowery skirt, a creaseless blouse, and a flowing scarf. She looks like a cross between Queen Elizabeth II and one of the many Muslim women she serves at the fabric shop she works at all day.

'Yes,' I agree, deciding that, as the older brother, I ought to make the initial effort. 'Are you looking forward to it?' I ask brightly, putting on a face adults only use with children.

Samira, dependably inoffensive, takes the bait.

‘Oh yes, we can’t wait can we?’ She puts a thick hand on my brother’s equally thick wrist. Of course, my brother is just marrying a miniature version of our mother, but without the wit. ‘My *ayeeyo* is flying in from Norway tomorrow. She’s eighty-one.’

‘Oh, you boys need tea, don’t you? Samira, help me in the kitchen – we can check on lunch too.’

I shudder at the thought of lunch. My mother still expects the women of a household to prepare food. But unluckily for us, she is a fantastically terrible cook. You might have expected a stereotypical immigrant mother, sourcing unimaginable ingredients from secret, sacred markets; a mythical spice knowledge combined with a wonderful, spell-binding stove. You and me both. That is one stereotype I *wished* my mother succumbed to. If I still prayed, I would pray hard to Allah for it. Because my poor mother’s cooking is an abomination. She leaves pans bubbling away until what’s left is a blackened slag. I have to regularly remind her of the joys of such exotic additions as ‘salt’ and ‘pepper’. I sniff the air. Today will be potatoes, barely boiled, and blackened chicken.

‘We need to talk about something,’ my brother says slowly, once we’re alone. ‘It’s the *nikah*, we need to chat about –’

‘The what? In English, c’mon.’

‘The *nikah*, the wedding contract, the ceremony before the reception on Saturday – you know, it’s a part of *our religion*.’ He says the last two words so sarcastically that his bobbing, chubby head almost has a life of its own.

‘I’m just kidding. I’m going, aren’t I? What is it, donation to the mosque? Need me to dress up? I’ve brought a suit, is that *alright* ...?’

‘Obviously.’ He sighs with the effort of the conversation in a very exaggerated manner, just like our mother. ‘We’re just having a few close family members come.’

‘Oh no, how many of our thousands of cousins got *chopped*?’ I see my brother’s moustache twitch against his will. I’m gratified he still possesses a sense of humour, albeit a hidden one.

‘Well ... all of them. It’s immediate family only for the *nikah* – we’ll have more at the reception afterwards.’

I sense a trap incoming and start shuffling in my seat.

‘... And the imam wants to meet you, to talk to you before he does the joining. He’s met the rest of us. Led prayers with us. But he wants to meet everyone.’ My brother winces a little. ‘... That includes you, since we’d like you to be one of the witnesses.’

Right on cue, at the worst possible moment, my mother wanders in with a tray laden with tea and digestive biscuits (my mother still believes *plain* digestives to be a treat). There’s also a jug of tepid apple juice, but no glasses. She sets it down and stands expectantly between us, as though waiting for a tip. My brother gives her a look and she soundlessly melts into the hallway.

‘I see Mum still insists on the finer things in life,’ I say, taking a plain digestive between my fingers and snapping it in my brother’s direction, feeling oddly powerful holding his *nikah* in my hands.

But as I’m chewing, and remembering that I hate digestives, a worrying thought emerges.

‘Which imam?’ I ask, through crumbs.

‘You know which – the old one, the one that you couldn’t stop arguing with.’

I cough, spluttering through the claggy pulp that’s formed in my mouth.

‘Look, I need two male, Muslim witnesses – it’s a requirement,’ he continues, as though we’re planning a bank job. ‘It can’t go ahead without that. I could get someone else,

but it'd be best if you were one of them, wouldn't it? It would look weird otherwise ...'

'Sure. I guess it would look ... *weird*,' I say. I am still the older brother, I suppose. He's quiet for a moment, shuffling uncomfortably. It's the first time he's looked anything other than neutral.

'Yes. And ... look. An imam at the mosque – not the old one, a different imam – once told me that *nikah* is like connecting two webs together.' He interlocks the fingers of his two hands as he says this. It feels practised, this lecture, or perhaps borrowed? I wonder who from. 'We're connecting two webs – our family's web and Samira's. And we ... I ... would like you as involved as possible when we do. It's important.'

It's quite the speech. I'm silent and he looks embarrassed. I don't blame him; I almost want to snigger, but I hold myself. My brother is always so serious, so dull. It's the first time in a long time that I've seen him be passionate. Well, ok, maybe not quite *passionate*. Very slightly warm, let's say.

'You can go to the mosque with *Hooyo*,' he continues, emphasising the Somali word, as if *I've* done something wrong by instead calling her 'Mum', 'but the imam wants to see you alone.'

I consider this, trying to sip the scalding tea to remove bits of digestive from my mouth. We both know I have no choice; if I said no, my mother would just guilt me into going.

'When am I meeting the old guy, Saturday morning?' I ask, thinking about how I'll prepare myself.

My mother bursts back into the room – she'd been in the hallway, listening. Two coats in hand, she flings one to me before wrestling with her own, full length, green woollen monstrosity.

'Now,' she barks. 'Come on, let's go – now, *up*.'

I'm stunned by the sudden activity. With unseen strength, she pulls me to my feet and begins dragging my coat over my shoulders.

'Wh-what about lunch,' I cry, suddenly wanting rock-hard potato and leather chicken. 'After, after! We're already late. C'mon, shoes on.'

She'd been planning this right from the start, of course. My shrewd mother.

'Shouldn't we take the bus?' I ask, as I'm steered towards the gates of the park.

'No, no, we have plenty of time,' says my mother, in complete contrast to literally two minutes ago. 'Anyway, this is nice, us walking together in Regent's Park.'

'But I thought we were late?'

'Who told you that?' she asks, in mock surprise.

She laughs and links arms. My mother has always been theatrical, always the star of her own pantomime, her responses ridiculous, her body language over the top and disarming.

'So, how have you been?' she asks.

I tell her about the things I have planned, the festivals and holidays I've booked. And then I tell her about work, about how dull it is, how annoying my colleagues are. I tell her about the arguments I'm having with my new neighbours.

'Didn't we agree that you'd stop complaining so much?'

'Did we?'

She wears an exhausted expression before taking a look over the park.

'This is where you used to play *truant* from the *madrassa*, isn't it?' she whispers to me conspiratorially as we walk.

She's acting as though she wasn't the one furious at me all those years ago when it was discovered I'd been bunking off every Saturday. I roll my eyes, making sure she sees. We walk on in silence, the winds a little strong. The sky is clear but the ground is slippery with autumnal decay, and the damp smell of wet tree bark is in the air. I used to love this park growing up. It was always so busy, with so many different kinds of people, that it was easy to be overlooked and ignored.

'I'm just reminding you, because you'll be meeting that same imam that caught you, the one that told you off and ... you know. I'm just letting you know.' As if I could forget. She may as well be preparing me to see the school bully.

'God, I hated that imam.'

'And he hated you,' she says, in a singsong. 'He was always amazed you and your brother are related: "Allah gave you them *both*?"'

That imam had been like a stereotypical villain in a Victorian novel; fingers tobacco-stained and teeth yellow. He was otherworldly-cruel compared to my secondary school teachers, who loved my quiet independence in their classrooms. If I forgot Arabic words in the imam's class, he'd make me stand up and recite them whilst encouraging the rest of the boys and girls to jeer. 'Stupid boy!' he'd shout, if I stumbled. Stupid, me? Who was in the top set for every subject at my normal school? Because, what, I couldn't remember the five pillars of Islam? Who cared about that? It didn't help me get into a good university, to get a good job.

'You exaggerate,' my mother says, admonishing my memories.

'Oh yeah? What about the stress positions I told you about?' My mother looks confused. 'Remember I told you. If you did something *really* bad, he'd make you sit with your arms above your head, holding a fat book so that the weight strained your muscles.' I mimed it for her, raising my arms to the serene, innocent blue sky. 'He'd just carry on the lesson whilst you sat there, in agony. My arms would ache so much.'

'Are you sure you're not dreaming?' my mother asks. 'Your brother never complained.'

'Well, he wouldn't complain if that imam rammed a firework up his ass.' My mother laughs, slapping my arm. Then she regains her composure.

'Don't be mean about your little brother.'

'I told you about those punishments, years ago, I did. And do you know what you told me? Do you remember what your solution was? You said: "Then don't be naughty."'

My mother stares at the few leaves of a passing tree, contemplative for a moment as she considers my pain.

'... Good advice. Did you take it?'

I give her the dirtiest look I keep in my armoury, but she just laughs.

'How does it go, Son? "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time?" You know this.'

'You're awful, all of you.'

'Oh my *poor baby*,' she coos, kissing me with her sarcastically pursed lips. 'You should have tried going to my *madrassa* in Somalia. The imam had a cane that would make you wet yourself.'

'How long ago was that then, Bronze Age? Or earlier? When the dinosaurs were still about?'

Now it's her turn to give me a glowering look.

'Oh, you *are* funny, aren't you? No wonder you were in trouble so often. I don't know where you get such a mouth Anyway,' my mother ventures, 'they've stopped doing that in the *madrassa* now.'

'So you do remember!'

'I asked about the *teaching* when we last spoke to the imam. He stopped doing things

that way a little after your brother.’ Her voice lowers: ‘... *between you and me*, I think he’s being moved on. The place is quite different. You should go there some time for prayers.’

Laying some contentment into my voice I say, ‘I’m fine, thanks.’

‘Do you even pray? It’s important. I’m just saying, I hope you’re being a good Muslim, out there. That you’re not just doing *nothing* with yourself.’ She switches the conversation over like a radio dial.

‘Yes, I pray Sometimes I do.’ This is so obviously a lie that my mother almost laughs.

‘Do you have a mosque near you, in Peckham? A local halal butcher? I worry, Son. I want to know that you aren’t getting into trouble, that’s all.’

We often go through this dance, her questioning, me obfuscating. I’m in no mood today, so I stay mute.

‘After I let you quit the *madrassa*, after that *trouble*, I thought you would turn over a new leaf. Take our religion seriously. You promised you’d read your *surahs* and pray if I let you quit – I just want to be sure that you’re still *trying*.’

‘Yes,’ I say, exasperated.

This is far from the truth though. I don’t have a Qur’an or a prayer mat in my flat. As if. I haven’t been inside a mosque in over ten years. I only eat halal meat when I’m unfortunate enough to be at my mother’s for lunch. Some of these facts she probably suspects.

I’m sure that my brother has never eaten meat that isn’t halal. God, my brother. I hated the mosque school; he loved it.

When we were young, I’d always try and get him to join me and my friends bunking off. We played football here in the park all day. I’d spend the money that should have been for lessons on crisps, sweets, and cans of fizzy drink. I loved it. I’d sneak a football out the front room window Saturday morning and make sandwiches without my mother noticing (bread, butter, and jam: simple, effective). When the boys at school – the ones who had begun to find my religion funny in the early noughties and suddenly made jokes about me being a terrorist, the ones who found it hilarious to ask me about my non-existent Christmases and treated me with suspicion overnight – found out about my Saturdays in the park, they’d all come along to hang out with me.

My brother hated bunking. He had a visceral, almost allergic reaction to rule breaking. He’d leave me by the pond, on the way to the mosque on Saturday mornings, and walk on, alone, to learn Arabic, to learn about how what I was doing was *haram*. And then that became his new favourite word, *haram*. He loved the officiousness of it. Because even if he couldn’t punish me himself, for the times that he caught me smoking, drinking, eating a hamburger from Maccies (disappointingly absent of ham), looking at page three of *The Sun* with two friends – all the normal, teenage rule-breaking and experimenting that you *have* to do – even if he couldn’t tell my mother, for fear of a swift, teenage beating from me, he could still call me *haram* and feel he’d done something.

As we walk along the tarmac path, we begin to see the golden dome of the mosque. It dominates the unusually flat North London skyline with its disappointing decadence. I say disappointing because the closer we get to it, the more we notice the many golden tiles that have fallen off the dome, making it look flaky and damaged. I imagine it looked resplendent in my mother’s early eighties heyday. She liked to remind us regularly of the time she once saw Mohamed Al-Fayed leaving in a Rolls Royce (‘He flirted with me, you know!’).

I slow my steps, wanting to stay outside for a little longer. My mother, arm looped with mine, speeds up, caressing me like a child.

‘We’re late,’ she reports, tugging me to the gates. Though I now doubt the veracity of

her statement.

I sigh and leave her at the entrance. Steeling myself, I walk across the concrete courtyard to find the old imam, to get this awful meeting over and done with.



Phanerite

By Cheryl Kilvington

Dancing relatives
barrel into the room,
their mouths and hands
busy with tunes
from the old country.
High in my uncle's hands
an olive wood tray spins
but we hardly notice
as inked digits blink
and flash back
at us: indigo blurs on thin
bare skin. From inside
their rose-budded frame
our dead cousins
with mildew-pocked faces
nod along to the music
from the mantelpiece.
I sit tight with my sisters;
we are strangers here
and do not know the words.
With mock-ceremony
he stoops, my uncle,
to deliver his gift. A gift
I did not ask for
and cannot understand.
The liver-red stone
I reach out to touch
is alive and palm-heavy,
shot through with quartz
the colour of a human eyeball.

Shaping the Girl

Shekina Rose

Sex, Lies and Slugs



I'm ten years old. It's a grey and rainy Tuesday evening, and getting dark outside. I storm into Mum's bedroom and, without switching on the lights, I begin to snoop through her drawers. I rummage through her socks, push my hands around her soft tights, her satin pyjamas, all the boring bits. I'm looking for something else, something *better*. My fingers touch the black, webbed underwear that she's squashed in the back of the drawer. I pull it out with one finger. Why would anyone wear anything so full of holes? Gross.

I place the holey *thing* back in the drawer, continue to slide my hands around her clothes, against the hard wood, feeling for something – anything. My hands find a small pink metallic pill packet, filled with tiny round pills. Each pill, a new day of the week. I feel sick in my tummy. I will ask Mum about these later, I think to myself.

I chuck the pills back in the drawer, continue to rummage. I'm startled by the feeling of something firm and papery against my knuckles. I touch it with my fingertips, realising it's a book. I pull it out, my heart beating. On its front is a painted picture of a naked woman.

The word *EROTICA*. The woman's boobs are huge, even bigger than Mum's, and they spill out onto her stomach, which she's pulling in, but it still looks flabby. She has dark brown lines painted in tiny slug-like shapes over her vagina. Is that ... hair? Ugh. My knees are trembling.

I open the front cover of the book, my whole body burning. Page one is a photograph. Two pale bodies. A man. A woman. Skin, wet with sweat. She is on her knees. He is standing above her, holding his – *you know what* – above her face.

Yuck. Yuck. Yuck.

I feel a sharp tightening in my chest. Dripping, out of his – *you know what* – is – *slug slime*. White, thick, creamy slug slime. Ugh. I can't breathe. Tears blur the corners of my eyes. I slam the book shut.

Muffled by the pattering rain on the window, I hear Mum downstairs, opening the door, softly climbing each step to her room. I throw the book in the drawer. I attempt to close it. Too late. She walks in the room.

What are you doing? she asks.

I don't reply. I just stare at her, my cheeks hot.

Don't look through my stuff, please, she says, sighing, as she looks at the half open drawer, and a stranded black sock that has decided to give me away.

I glare at her, my heart racing. I am not sorry. I am not sorry. I am NOT SORRY. She has ruined my life. I have *every* right to know *everything*.

What are those pills in your drawer? I ask, a weight in my chest telling me I won't like the answer.

They're to stop me getting pregnant, she responds, matter-of-fact, confirming that she is *disgusting* and she and my not-dad, Simon are in fact 'doing it' on a regular basis. Their revolting slug-like tongues appear in my head.

Slut, I say, under my breath, although I don't know what it means exactly. I heard a girl at school say it to another girl in the playground.

Don't call me that, she says calmly. She brushes past me and picks up the sock, and I get a whiff of that expensive *J'Adore* perfume Simon got her for her birthday. They are *gross*. But the smell is delicious. I will spray my whole body with it before school tomorrow, I think to myself. She puts the sock back in the drawer and gently closes it.

Tea's ready, she says.

I scowl at her and follow her downstairs. She's made sausages and creamy mash.

* * *

A few months before the 'snooping in Mum's drawers' incident, my parents got married. They had been together for twenty years already: they had shared three children, lots of arguments, loss, holidays, and throughout it all, some love. Some deep, complicated love, but it was there – I like to think it was there.

I have a pre-marriage memory of standing in the kitchen, watching Mum jump up and down with excitement as Dad told her he'd booked a holiday to the South of France. They jumped simultaneously, their arms wrapped around each other, as the kitchen floor rattled below us. I remember that holiday – driving along winding lanes, the sun burning through the window of the car, 'If It Makes You Happy' by Sheryl Crow blasting out of the speakers, while they both sang, or screamed, along in the front:

If it makes you happy, it can't be that baaaaaaaaa-ad,

If it makes you happy, then why the hell are you so sad?!

I looked on from the back, trying to sing along too, my mouth full of salami and thick buttered baguette. I noticed Dad's hand, gently resting on Mum's leg, his one-handed

steering. Only moving his hand away from her leg to change the gear stick.

I remember tears. Mum, on that same holiday, crying in the tent. Dad had forgotten to put all the pegs in the ground, there had been a storm, and the entire inside of the tent had become a river. It was his fault. He had ruined everything.

* * *

A year later, they got married. The day is scattered, like confetti, in my mind. It was warm and cloudy, just a few splashes of blue in the sky. Mum wore a straight-down cream dress with delicate silk patterns sewn along the hem, and an open neck showing her collar bones, with a turquoise cardigan and tiny blue flowers clipped into her hair, making the blue in her eyes look even bluer. She looked stunning and understated, as always. Dad – who has the remarkable ability to look like a homeless man one day, and James Bond the next – wore a dark grey suit. His laces were done up, his belt was fastened.

They said their vows outside in a crumbling church ruin. They had asked me to walk down the aisle with them, but when the moment came, I looked down at my dress, at my body, which in my ten-year-old mind looked ugly and horrifying. I knew all the guests would be staring, laughing, noticing my discomfort in the tight and girly bridesmaid's dress. They would see the curve of my misshapen, growing boobs through the thin material, the rolls of flab on my tummy, the wobble of my under arms, the trunk-ish size of my ankles. They would *see* me. I suddenly felt – shy. I sat on the wall of the church with my friends, chatting and smiling, watching from afar. My parents, my own parents, were *finally* getting married.

After the vows, we made our way to the huge, white marquee for the reception, set up on a field in the hills. Guests gasped at the view: green meadows, greys and blues of roads and rivers, slanted rooftops scattered across our local town, laid out in the valley below.

The party started. My heart raced as I jumped on the bouncy castle with the other children, a deep pain in my stomach, laughing hysterically as we lay in a heap, our bodies squashed and limbs aching. Losing air. Laughing some more.

Our fun was interrupted by a grown-up, calling us inside for the speeches. Mum and Dad had saved me a seat on their table. Mum let me taste her champagne – just a sip – and it was sharp and bitter. The bubbles popped on my tongue and made my eyes water.

After the speeches, my friend and I got up on stage in front of the guests and sang our rehearsed made-up honeymoon version of 'We're Going to Ibiza' by the Vengaboys. We swapped 'Ibiza' to 'Mexico', where my parents were going on their honeymoon. We wriggled and writhed, desperately attempting 'sexy', our voices out of tune. Everyone cheered, the party continued.

Later that evening, with their arms held loosely around each other's waists, Mum and Dad cut the cake. As the knife touched the cake stand, fireworks exploded, filling the night sky with intense, glittering colours, and sprinkling golden light across their smiling faces. They kissed. I saw a tear rolling down Dad's cheek. I yawned, even though I didn't feel tired. They pulled me into their warmth. Mum whispered it was nearly midnight, and bedtime soon.

They went on their honeymoon to Mexico. Me and my younger siblings stayed with our grandparents. We made our parents a 'Welcome Home' banner for their return. They brought us back hand-crafted wooden dominoes, which we played at my grandparents' house. Each domino piece was subtly shaped in a different way to the next. I remember sitting at the table, silently admiring my parents' bronzed skin and bright blue eyes. Watching Mum's hands placing down the dominoes, her tanned, slender fingers contrasting with her sparkling wedding ring.

We went home, back to normal, apart from the piles of wedding gifts, unmoved and

unopened in the living room, and the new feeling I had of content. Something inside me felt – *better* – now they were married.

* * *

A week after they returned from their honeymoon, Dad went away. Time off work, no planning in advance. A few days later, he picked me up from school. He was waiting for me in the playground, his arms folded across his chest. As I got closer to him, I could see his jeans were dirty. His trainers weren't fastened properly. Even closer, and I noticed his stubbly beard and the unmissable dark bags under his eyes. He kissed my head, hardly speaking.

I tried to talk to him, but he responded with only his infamous grunt. The 'I'm not listening' grunt. The 'I'm not here' grunt. A grunt we would grow used to.

He took me home. Mum was not there. I thought nothing of it. They were married. They were my *mum and dad*. She would be home soon.

That night, Dad came into my room to read with me. We were reading *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* together. I was looking forward to reading to him. We had just got to the part where Hagrid comes to collect Harry and take him to Hogwarts. It was getting exciting, but Dad didn't seem to notice. In fact, he seemed distracted. I placed the book face down next to me on the bed. I propped myself up against the pillows. Dad was sitting on the floor by the bed.

What's going on, Dad? I asked. He paused for a moment. Then he spoke, his voice heavy.

I think your mum likes someone else.

I heard his words, but what he said meant very little to me. I don't think I was upset, or sad. I thought Dad was just in one of his moods. I think I thought *so what?* Mum liked someone else. I knew all about fancying people. I fancied all sorts of boys at school and had a serious crush on Leonardo DiCaprio. I was an experienced ten-year-old. It didn't mean anything at all. She would be home soon. It would all be fine. They were married. They were my parents, my security. It would all be *fine*.

Although there was no bad feeling in my chest, or my stomach, no lump in my throat, a part of me still wanted to find out more. Maybe I did know something was just a little bit wrong. I sat in bed and pestered Dad to tell me who this 'someone' Mum liked was, listing all of my parents' friends who happened to be male.

Is it Robert? (Dad's best friend)

No, no, not Robert.

Is it Ian? (Dad's other best friend)

No – absolutely not.

Is it that Dave guy who always wears those stupid baggy trousers?

No. Stop asking.

I hoped if I kept saying names, he might give away the right answer with his eyes, or accidentally tell me the truth – he had always been a bad liar. But there was no use. Even if I named all the 35-40 year old men in the world, he still wouldn't tell me.

Is it – Simon? I asked, one more time.

Sorry, he said, looking genuinely sorry. I can't tell you, I'm sorry, he said again.

He didn't get cross with me. He probably felt sorry for me, he knew what was coming next. He kissed my forehead.

Go to sleep soon, please. Love you. His voice tailed off. He left the room.

I read more *Harry Potter*, then I fell asleep. I dreamed of wizards and witches and crumbling church ruins, Mum and Dad standing at the disintegrating altar, rocks and bricks

crashing down around them.

* * *

The next day was Maisy Whelan's birthday party. It was hot and sunny, and we were all going for a picnic by the river on the hills. Although I was only ten, I fit into all Mum's clothes, and that day, I wore her lime green shirt and flared jeans with pink flowers on the legs. I brushed my hair, put on a little bit of Mum's mascara. Smiled at myself in the mirror.

It was nearly time to leave and my dad was still on the phone upstairs in the spare room. I looked at the phone on the hook by the sofa. Why was he upstairs? Why was he being so private? What was he talking about? I tiptoed up the stairs, where I found myself standing outside the spare room, my head glued against the door, listening to every word that came out of his mouth.

It's like something from a soap. It's like I'm living in some kind of *Eastenders* nightmare!

A soap? He was silent for a moment. I heard him take a gulp of his coffee. Then he cleared his throat.

Simon? How can she have slept with Simon?

My heart raced, as I moved away from the door, and the floorboard creaked beneath me. Simon? *Simon?* My dad's best mate. *My best mate's dad!* My – MUM – SLEPT – WITH Simon?!

I'd heard 'slept with' before. They said it all the time on *Eastenders*. One thing I knew, even then, aged ten, is that the phrase 'slept with' is rarely used about actual sleeping. 'Slept with' meant s-e-x. I'd seen it in the film *The Beach*, in the sea, when they started off by kissing and then their bodies got closer and they kind of wrapped their bodies around each other and kept kissing with their tongues inside each other's mouths and he pulled off her t-shirt and then – something else happened. Something I couldn't imagine but I knew was a thing, through books at school and that embarrassing sex-education class we did in Year 5. And alongside all this kissing and clothes ripping off, Richard and Francois in *The Beach* were *in love*. That's something else I knew too – 'sleeping with' usually came with love. Being IN LOVE. Falling in love. Although, actually, 'slept with', on *Eastenders*, often meant the end. Or a fight. Or bad news and lots of crying. Or murder.

The feeling I felt then, I can still remember now:

Sunk. Something sunk. Hard and heavy in my stomach.

I ran downstairs. Paced the living room. Dad came down and said it was time to set off. We sat in the car together, and for once in my life I was silent. I didn't know what to say to him. My chest was tight, my stomach was churning. I felt terrible, but I wasn't sure who I felt terrible for. My dad? My mum? My brother and sister? Me? Did I feel ashamed? Did I feel lost? Angry? Probably all of the above. But mostly, I felt sick. Sick and dirty. The words 'Slept with' were on a perpetual loop, twisting around and around in my head. Slept with? My mum wouldn't do that. That doesn't happen in real life. Not in *my life*.

Slept with. Slept with. Slept with.

And as well as those words, those horrific, dirty words, I had the image. The image of my own mum, my MUM, and my dad's best friend, putting their pink, gooey tongues inside each other's mouths, slimy, filthy slugs, writhing. Hands grabbing. Clothes coming off.

Something had shifted inside me. My parents' wedding had given me a feeling of subtle, but definitely there, contentment. This had pulled me down, below the surface, into a dirty sewer filled with stinky puddles and grime, where everything was adult and unclean. And the slugs. I just kept thinking about the slugs.

Dad dropped me off at the party. I ran out of the car, slammed it behind me. Ran from the road to the river's edge before he had a chance to say goodbye. My friends were there, sitting by the river, putting sun cream on and getting ready to paddle. A few parents were there too, watching and handing out crisps and drinks. I walked quickly over to the group, making a beeline for Hattie, my best friend – one of Simon's daughters – as she waved me over.

Can we sit somewhere else? I asked, ignoring the rest of the group, my heart thudding wildly. Her face fell. She stood up and grabbed her towel. She took my hand and we walked away from the rest of the party, near a rock, just on the water's edge. I felt sweat drip down my back, Mum's green shirt sticking to my skin.

Hattie, I've got something to tell you, I said, suddenly feeling guilty, aware this life-changing news would hurt her too.

My mum. Your dad. They've been ... I paused. Took a breath ... I didn't even know how to say it.

They've been – *sleeping with each other*.

I waited for her to look shocked, upset, angry. To stand up, and start pacing, like I did in the house that morning. But she looked down at her lap. Silence for a few seconds. Then she spoke.

I know, she said, her face pale. Dad told me last week. He asked me not to say anything yet. She had known all along. For a week. An entire week. She had been trusted, she had been seen by our parents as *grown-up* enough to know. My stomach hurt, there was an empty pain running through me, gnawing at me from the insides.

Hattie and I stayed there for the rest of the afternoon, on that rock by the river, the sun burning down, talking, over, and over. Our parents had been having an affair for a year and a half. They were *together* now. As the sun sank lower, we continued to talk, desperate to understand what had happened – what might happen next.

It was nearly dark, and time to go home. Midges were rising from the water, stinging our ankles. We packed up the towels and walked to the road, where my dad was in the car waiting for me. As we drove over the hills, along bumpy, snaking lanes, back to the home that was no longer my *home*, all I could think about was sex, lies, and slugs, and I realised my life as I knew it was over.

Found Wanting

By Jennifer Nuttall

Not another lost pair of gloves
or shoes which have hidden
since they were last worn;
just yesterday.
Not trying to make a packed lunch
only to discover the absence
of bread. Not the dryer!
Not at this time of year!
Not black trousers then, blue jeans
for school, and scribbling “sorry”
onto a scrap of paper torn from my diary
with “rsday” still printed on one corner.
Not another morning key hunt
and three rounds of hide-the-thimble
with my phone before unlocking the door
into grey rain. Not soggy feet.
Not having to buy Fruit Shoot
on the way because I forgot
to go to the supermarket, for the third time
this week. Not ‘the look’
from the teaching assistant at the gate.
Not sitting next to strangers
on the bus when I still have notes
to finish and feeling the sensation of their eyes
on my words. Not going to be late.
Not arriving red and obvious
at Gynae Clinic B for this, the latest
lesson in flexible presence.
Not undressing from the waist down
and wondering why this is the only time
anyone, ever
in the whole history of speaking
has used the words “scoot”
and “bottom to feet.”
Not being told to relax
and to let my knees drop
and envisioning the cavities
of Lycian tombs and the lives
that were lived and ended there
and how much it doesn’t matter
whether they woke up late
or their floors were swept

or their bodies betrayed them
or who or how they loved,
because all of their failings
haven't altered the rock.

Fiddler's Bow

Emma Bosworth

An angry buzzing woke Laura up. Her mobile was vibrating on the table beside her head. A musty lived-in smell like old net curtains told her she was somewhere strange and induced a small wave of nausea. As she stirred and stretched her legs heavy layers of well-used blankets shifted on top of her. The air was cool and damp and felt like a kiss on her cheek, which left a lingering promise of a fresh new day. She opened her eyes and saw her suitcase left half-open by the side of the bed where she'd left it the night before. It was packed to the brim with her clothes – clothes for all seasons. Outside it was a Monday morning and sounds of a town rising to work rippled up from the street below: a pair of hurried footsteps, the swishing of a single broom sweeping the pavement, last night's bottles crashing into a bin, agitated voices still croaky with sleep. Above it all the air was pierced by the sound of gulls.

Laura got up and walked to the single-glazed window. She'd asked for a room with a sea view and found if she pressed her forehead up against the glass, sliding her eyes around to the left as far as they could go, she could just make out the horizon, framed between two rain-stained buildings. A thick line of deep grey.

Checking the time on her phone, she was forced to see the number of missed calls she'd ignored over the last twelve hours. Three messages appeared on her home screen:

Dave Home
Where are you?

Dave Home
Tell me you're okay at least.

Dave Home
????

She put her phone back on the table, face down. She wasn't ready to reply. She wasn't sure what, if anything, she wanted to send back to 'Dave Home'. She missed the time when he was just Dave from work. She liked to remember back then. Back when they first started getting together. Everyone in the office liked Dave. So, when he asked her out for a date, of course she'd said yes. Everyone was so happy for them, for her. And when he asked her to move in, of course she said yes. She'd been struggling to pay the rent, and he had a nice three bed house in Cheadle Hulme. He had a big comfy sofa and a new large screen television with all the channels. There was space and light, and a small garden at the back. His kitchen had all the utensils you could need and more, there was even a device for peeling pineapples. Life was easy with Dave.

She had to stay active. The day stretched out ahead of her: vast, expansive, and empty. She picked up *A Guide to the Moray Firth* from the pamphlet tray and scoured the

contents page. Fiddler's Bow, according to the guidebook, was 'a breathtaking natural rock formation sculpted by the sheer force of waves over time.' A photograph showed a dramatic view of towering rocks rising out of the sea, with caverns and arches like an ancient, weathered citadel. And it was less than an hour's drive away. Perfect.

She caught sight of herself in the mirror as she got dressed. The room was too small to avoid it. She turned to the side, there was no noticeable difference to her body yet. Nothing to intimate the life beginning inside her.

* * *

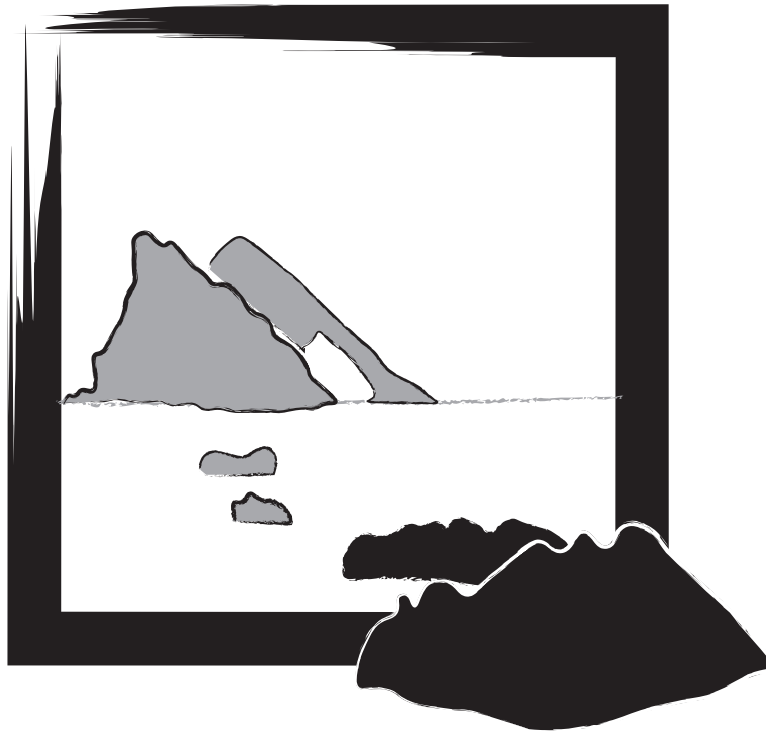
In the breakfast room nothing matched. The wallpaper was dusky pink and rose pink in broad vertical stripes and the carpet was a royal blue with gold specks. The curtains at the large bay window perhaps used to be yellow. There was just one large varnished wooden table for guests, without a tablecloth. All the empty chairs were of different styles and from different time periods, none of which matched with the table. Presumably because it was out of season, the only other people at breakfast were a young woman and her child, who was happily scribbling across the pages of a colouring book. Laura thought she could remember being the same age as this child, lying on the living room floor and colouring in, with the muted melodrama of daytime soaps playing in the background. Back then it seemed like she was outside of time. She'd luxuriate in never-ending afternoons, letting time wash over her with each melodious tick of the mantelpiece clock.

Laura's place at the table was set up for breakfast opposite the mother and child. She pulled up a chair and removed a crayon from her bowl. The woman looked at her apologetically and Laura smiled back at her.

'Good morning.'

The sound of her own voice came as a surprise, though the woman showed no real interest in talking with her. After responding politely, she turned to her daughter as they made whispered plans and promises for the day. The initial rejection Laura felt, was quickly replaced with relief. She'd never been any good at making conversation with strangers.

The same elderly gentleman who last night had handed her the keys to her room, took her breakfast order, and returned with a boiled egg, toast, and a pot of tea. Music surged in the background; it sounded familiar. It was a piece designed to create an ebb and flow of emotion, swelling with strings and winds before crashing and receding into quiet. It struck Laura with a vivid memory, although she wasn't certain if this memory was a dream or a real time and place. She was looking along a long, lush lawn to a large house with all its windows and doors thrown open. The sunlight was warm and golden, and there was a gentle breeze rippling through the grass. Music was being played, an opera, which drifted through the air playfully towards her. Laura in that moment felt a desire she'd never experienced before or since. She'd gone out for an early morning walk on her own and got lost. And she'd found something magical, something beautiful and all her own. The lady opposite smiled as she packed up her daughter's crayons and ushered her out of the room. A low, urgent vibration began emanating from the floor beneath Laura's chair. Her phone was ringing. She kicked her bag away. She didn't want to deal with that right now. She didn't want to reject the calls – that would be too much of an action. She just wanted it to stop.



At Fiddler's Bow the beach was empty. Earlier Laura had watched two fossil hunters clamber among the rocks and boulders at the bottom of the cliffs until they disappeared into the next bay. She used to love fossil hunting when she was younger. Her father had bought her a small tool for prising open stones. It was that wonder of discovering dormant life. Her prized possession was a fragment of an ancient sea creature she'd unearthed. You could make out each frond on its tentacles and if you stared at it for long enough your eyes would trick you into thinking they moved.

Since the fossil hunters had left, Laura wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting alone on the beach. The sunny morning had long since disappeared and a sea mist had engulfed the entire inlet so that the tops of the cliffs were invisible. She thought of all the families and elderly couples up there in the small fishing village, with its car park and picnic benches and ice cream parlour. They couldn't see her either. They'd perhaps just make out the tops of Fiddler's Bow, materialising out of the mist like some ancient forgotten land. Laura had never felt so isolated, it made her feel both deeply afraid and highly excited. How long had she been waiting and listening and staring at the rise and fall of the sea? She could no longer work out if the sound was coming from outside or inside her mind. The soaring and crashing of the waves felt like it was now part of her.

Her thoughts were broken by the sound of human voices approaching from the stone steps leading down to the beach behind her. Bold and bullish male voices. Two young men zipped up in wetsuits strode one after the other towards the shoreline. The bay now belonged to them. Behind them two girls walked side by side. Pretty, petite, and confident. All four of them standing there, cartoonish in their physical perfection, like they'd just stepped into life in their shiny waterproof skins. They were like miniature deities poised for action. And they acted as though she wasn't there, for a moment Laura wondered if she had really disappeared into the mist. She cleared her throat. One of the girls, who was beginning to hang back, looked at her. The other three were marching back and forth along the sea's edge, pointing, and kicking stones about. Laura found herself willing them to get on with it. She had the feeling of being held hostage.

The girl who had looked at her, turned and walked away from the group. Laura watched as the girl sat down on a rock about a couple of metres along the beach from her own. She felt a frisson of connection, of recognition. The first lead male, ran over to the seated girl and she spoke:

‘I’m not jumping, I’m staying here.’

‘Are you sure Pen?’

‘Yes. You go. I’m staying. I’ll cheer you on through the tunnel.’

The ‘tunnel’ was a natural arch formed within the rocky edge of the land as it reached out into the sea; its cavernous interior was as big as a cathedral. From her position Laura could see past the girl Pen and through the tunnel to a huge homogeneous mass of sea and mist, an eternal limbo. Their plan, as Laura now fully recognised with awe and nausea, was to swim out to the smallest of the colossal rock formations, scale it, then leap off into the sea before swimming through the tunnel back to the beach.

‘Okay guys are you ready?’

The other two nodded as the lead male spoke, and they all set off. Laura admired them as they swam so precisely, towards their goal. They climbed the rock in their bare feet, balanced and poised. Their tiny figures silhouettes against the massive landscape. Then one after the other they dove off out of sight, in the same pecking order they’d maintained since they first walked out.

* * *

Laura checked her watch; nearly an hour had passed. Although it felt like time had barely moved. Each empty, silent second crashed in and sifted out in waves of uncertainty. The tension made every passing moment grow longer and heavier. The swimmers’ return became a singular fixed point that held both Laura and the waiting girl Pen captive.

The girl was completely still. Every muscle in her body was taut, frozen in time, ready for the slightest sign of her friends. Laura felt electric. Can people just disappear like that? What if they never returned? Would the girl just sit there and wait forever? And Laura, who now felt an affinity, almost protective, over this younger girl, would she wait with her? No. She’d been on pause for a lifetime already. She couldn’t sit here in an endless state of equilibrium with this stranger, this girl. Something needed to change. Something had changed. She could feel it inside her. She got up to leave. Before she did, she pulled her phone from her bag and left it on the rock where she’d been sitting. As Laura walked away the sun pierced the mist and she thought she heard echoes of voices returning through the tunnel, but she didn’t look back.

Response to 'The Distance I can be from my Son'

After Lenka Clayton

Madeline Hoffman

If I were to have a son
I would watch him toddle down a field in a white cap,
a flag against the rolling hills of green
picked just for him, which he sidesteps,
heading instead for the trees with shadows holding I don't know what,
sending me running down the hill towards this, the danger I can see,
the hint of one at least, before which I would scoop my baby up
carrying him back to the open field
because when you have a baby, you run towards the shadows
as soon as you see them and the hurt that comes
—it always comes—is not your fault.

If I could have a son,
which I can't, I cannot have a son,
I would film him running down the grocery aisle when his legs
were still clumsy as a colt's, limbs thick and swaying with hesitation
that he would lose as he aged into a boy, spindly and agile,
galloping out of sight until, because I had a son,
his legs would shake
as the toddling movements returned, so he would fall sometimes
and then often, and I would know
that I chose this for him
as you did not choose for me, you didn't know.

You had a son, which I can't, which is to say I shouldn't
bring a child into this world knowing
the promise of strife put on that child's head. Shouldn't I choose
the alley left to me, the scooping sort of safety offered
by my arms and an open field. If I know that safety is a promise
I could never keep then shouldn't I make a different promise,
one that comes from that same wellspring of care, one that wants
my child to be able to run away from me
into the alley and down the hill to find his own shadows and hurts,
to have the hope of an open script
without the antagonist already written in.

This Burning World

Dipika Mummery

‘And that, gentlemen, is why you should take us on for this case.’

Nila closed the presentation and looked at Arash. One of the client’s reps nodded at her, but did Arash think she’d done enough? Surely she had; there’d been no mistakes and everyone on both sides of the table had paid attention throughout.

He flashed a professional, approving smile at her. Nila tilted her head slightly and sat down while he fielded the last few questions from Ashby & West’s reps, all senior executives. Her triumph sat quietly inside her as she watched. There were three of them, all middle-aged white men – two balding, the stench of too much aftershave hovering about them. One of them, Eric, had smiled at her for a bit too long in the first meeting a month ago. Still, they were the key to the next step in her law career, to completing the plan. A&W was a multinational bank accused of investing in illegal deforestation in the Amazon. She’d poured hours into the preparations for her presentation on the possible impact of the bank losing their case in court.

Arash directed the conversation until it was inevitable that the case was theirs. It had been a long meeting, but his suit still looked immaculate and his forehead was smooth, with no sign of the worried frown he wore during the weeks of prep for this meeting. She was full of pride and love for him; he’d been at his best today and was still at his best even now, four hours into the meeting. He paid full attention to whatever the client reps said, turning slightly in his chair to face whoever was speaking and making eye contact, nodding intently. Their questions never seemed to wrong-foot him; he had a full and satisfying answer to each one. Only she knew how hard he’d worked to be able to answer those questions, how he’d spent long nights going through every single piece of information and pulling it apart to make sure he couldn’t be tripped up on any tiny details.

It was while she made quick, neat notes on the rest of the proceedings that she felt something pull at her insides, then a dull ache settling in her belly.

She tried to ignore it. Maybe it was her period. It came on suddenly like this; she would have to sort it out in the toilets soon. She forced herself back to the meeting, to holding on to the feeling of victory.

‘... your colleague’s excellent presentation,’ one of the reps, Bill, said. Arash sent another small smile her way. She raised her eyebrows, then smiled back. They had been colleagues longer than they had been a couple, but work and love had never interfered with each other; if anything, they had worked together even more effectively since that first date two years ago.

‘Well, it was very thoroughly researched. You know, we didn’t get that sort of information from the other guys last week. It was all very predictable. Revenues and profits and all that balance sheet stuff.’ Bill glanced at Nila. ‘You’ve really made us think about factors we hadn’t considered before.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ Arash said. ‘They just don’t have the talent.’

The pain deepened, choking off the pleasure of being praised within earshot. Of all the times for her period to turn up. At least the meeting was nearly over.

Then the pain intensified, blooming in her side and spreading towards her spine. She bit back a gasp. She would take some ibuprofen when she was back at her desk. She could see the red and white box in the second drawer. She kept the image there. All she had to do was get to the end of the meeting.

The next few minutes felt like hours. Arash shook hands with the clients. It was done. She tried to recapture her earlier feeling of triumph as she and the rest of the team stood.

The pain became a shard of glass stabbing her in one side. She almost winced. An insistent tugging sensation pulled at her left shoulder blade. Was this what it felt like to be literally pulled in all directions, like a medieval traitor to the throne being dragged apart by horses? A hysterical laugh almost bubbled up her throat.

Nila tried to smile calmly, and shook everyone's hands, but she couldn't bring herself to meet their eyes. Droplets of sweat formed on her hairline. She wiped them away. Arash followed the clients out of the meeting room. He gave Nila a thumbs up as he left. She sat down again and pretended to make a note of something while she waited for the rest of Arash's team to leave. Then she folded over, her damp forehead resting on the cover of her notepad. If this was period pain, it was the worst she'd ever had.

Or maybe it wasn't period pain. Perhaps it was something else, something to do with how sick and dizzy she felt yesterday evening. But hadn't that just been exhaustion? That's what she'd told Arash, anyway.

Time stretched as she walked through the office to her desk. Jaw clenched, she nodded at her colleagues. Would she even make it through the rest of the afternoon?

The box was there in the second drawer. She put it in her bag. Then the stabbing got worse, like something heavy and sharp jabbing into her side. There was no use; she couldn't help but let out a quiet gasp. Thank goodness no one seemed to hear her.

She hurried to the toilets with her bag. She prayed she hadn't made a mess of her skirt. The tailored suit had been bought especially for this; she was investing in her future. Helping to secure the bank as a client – their biggest ever – and then win their case would be the making of her career. Something to add to the nice house, the handsome husband, all the money that sat in the bank. Just imagine if she had to spend the rest of the day hiding the back of her skirt while popping painkillers.

There was a stranger in the mirror, with glassy dark brown eyes and lank strands of hair escaping from her chignon. That morning, she had carefully made up her face with a small amount of concealer and a dusting of powder, but her light brown skin now bore a sickly pale sheen. Her mouth was half-open, as if she was about to scream. She clamped it shut, turned, and staggered into a cubicle.

She looked. There was blood, but it hadn't seeped through her clothes yet. Somehow, she managed to use a tampon. Then she used a pad, too. She dry-swallowed two pills and slowly walked back to her desk.

The office had emptied out; there were only a few colleagues from another team clustered around a monitor at the other end of the room, their faces ghost-like in the screen's white glare. Perhaps everyone else had gone for a drink to celebrate. She was supposed to be there too, with Arash, everyone congratulating them. But how could she? She just wanted to go home, have a bath, take some sleeping pills if there were any in the bathroom cabinet.

She opened her inbox, clicked on an email, and tried to read it, but she didn't get past the first line without wincing. She logged off.

What *was* this? It couldn't be period pain. Her thoughts skittered around the whispering voice, returning to its impossible words, then bouncing away, over and over. She

couldn't listen to it. Not now, not at work. Later. At home. She searched for her car keys, then remembered. They'd got the train into Manchester so they could both have a few drinks later. Well, on the train, then. She would look it up on her phone on the train, then when she got off at East Didsbury, she would walk – no, get a taxi home. Or, better still, she could just get a black cab from the rank outside the office.

The pain pulsed harder, rampaging up and down the left side of her body. The ibuprofen hadn't done a thing.

She gathered her things, rehearsing what she would say to Arash when she called him. It was a bad period. He knew she got them sometimes. They would have to celebrate the win together another time. He would be disappointed, though.

She checked her phone as she stood. There was a message:

Hurry up before we drink all the champagne! xxx.

She tried to type out a reply in the lift. The letters didn't make sense. She sent it anyway, just as the doors opened. Then she almost walked into someone coming out of the opposite lift.

'Sorry,' she tried to say, but it came out as a small whisper. Like the voice in her head, the one telling her to get help now, find a doctor, do something, anything.

'Excuse me,' she said to the woman sitting behind the desk in the foyer. She had to lean on the desk to keep herself upright. The floor-to-ceiling windows behind reception were dark, but Nila could see something bright and harsh through the windows to her right. *Just Christmas lights*, she thought, but she had to briefly close her eyes and turn away from the entrance. She tried to keep her gaze on the woman's face: glasses framed by blonde hair, bright pink blusher, crinkly eyes. A familiar face. She sat behind the desk every evening. Nila tried to remember her name, but nothing came past the agony.

The woman looked at her, her polite smile fading. 'Are you alright?' she asked. She stood up and brought a radio to her mouth, but Nila couldn't tell what she was saying. Everything was so far away, disappearing in a haze of pain. There was something sticky between her thighs; the fabric of each leg of her tights slipped over each other too easily.

Oh, she thought.

Her ears rang faintly. The pain pulsed up her back, then all went black



When Nila opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was the concerned face of her father, Ramesh, and the tears of her mother, Jyoti. Had she been asleep? Perhaps her parents were visiting and she had forgotten.

Then she noticed the dilapidated ceiling tiles above them, the strange smell of bodies and cleaning products, the tightness in her belly as she tried to ease herself upright, like she'd done vigorous sit-ups the day before.

Pain. Blood. She closed her eyes again, trying to dissolve the memory in darkness. Ramesh started to tell her what had happened. The words swirled around her, refusing to make sense. Not just the words; everything around her seemed to shimmer through a thick haze, almost like she was drunk. She stared over Ramesh's shoulder as Jyoti slipped out of the room. She wanted to call her back, but she couldn't remember how to speak. Instead, a nurse came in, spoke to Ramesh and fussed around Nila for a few moments, then smiled and disappeared.

It had been an ectopic pregnancy, Ramesh said. The baby had tried to grow in one of her fallopian tubes.

Baby? Whose baby?

'The tube ruptured,' he explained. 'Both baby and the tube had to be removed during emergency surgery.'

Surgery. Anaesthetic? That would explain why her thoughts felt like they were stuck together with glue. Why the room swayed around her.

But whose was the baby? It wasn't hers. It couldn't be. She was careful. She took the pill every morning.

It wasn't hers.

'Technically, you can still get pregnant again, but the risk of another ectopic pregnancy is now higher. It could be dangerous to both the baby and to you.'

'My baby?' she asked, or she thought she did, because Ramesh didn't reply. Maybe he couldn't hear her.

She looked up at the ceiling again, and frowned. The tiles really were in a state.

'I've got private health insurance through work, you know,' she said.

Ramesh's face came into view, her vision suddenly still and clear. She looked at the lined skin under his greying shock of hair, and his intent dark eyes and mouth, just like hers. He held her hand gently, like she was about to disintegrate. His rough skin slid over hers.

Like tights slipping past each other.

'The NHS is just as capable of looking after you, beti,' Ramesh said, his expression unchanged.

The pain, the blood, the deep black.

Her stomach plunged. She had to sink back down to a lying position. It was exhausting, trying to stay upright against the hard pillows.

'I know,' she whispered. 'Sorry.'

Her left side itched, but she didn't want to move to scratch it. If she stayed very still, if she didn't move a single millimetre, perhaps it would turn out that none of this was real. Perhaps she would fall asleep again and wake up in her own bed at home, her limbs stretching across pure cotton sheets. Then she would follow her usual morning routine, go to work, be congratulated by her colleagues, go out for lunch with Arash, stroke the back of his hand with no knowledge of what it was like to be so utterly betrayed by her own body. To be so totally at the mercy of this thing that couldn't even hold on to a collection of cells.

Cells that she didn't even think she'd wanted in the first place.

The door opened. Nila couldn't see past Ramesh to the doorway, but then Arash spoke.

‘Nila. Thank God! Thank God you’re awake.’

His face appeared over hers, dark shadows under his eyes, his fingers intertwining with her own. Ramesh stepped back to stand next to Jyoti, who was still weeping.

‘Arash,’ Nila said. What else could she say? What should she say?

‘I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you awoke. I only went to get some air.’

‘It’s okay,’ she said, automatically.

Jyoti moved to the other side of the bed so she could briefly hold Nila’s other hand. The metal of her rings felt warm against Nila’s palm. She couldn’t remember the last time her mother had held her hand, other than the wedding. When she was a child, perhaps.

‘We’ll leave you and Arash alone now,’ Jyoti said.

‘You’re going?’

‘Just to the cafe,’ Ramesh said hastily. He looked at Arash, who still only stared at Nila. ‘We’ll be back later.’

Her parents left. She closed her eyes, but the heat of Arash’s gaze forced them open again.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered, waiting for his expression to change, to reveal how angry he must be with her.

He’d been dropping hints lately – showing her pictures of his nephew, slowing down whenever they walked past the upmarket toyshop in town, talking about his own childhood. Joking about his parents’ constant questions about babies. A throwaway comment about the possibility she was pregnant the night before the meeting, when she had felt too sick with what she’d thought was nerves to finish dinner.

That was what was supposed to come next after the fairytale wedding: the cherubic children, school runs, socialising with other mothers, wiping food from young faces, putting her own needs last. She was supposed to be prepared when the time came, as long as she’d planned it all out: conception, scans, a nursery, prams and toys and chairs, clothes.

But she’d never thought it could end up like this.

‘No,’ Arash said, tears spilling down his face. They dripped onto the sheets. ‘No, Nila, it’s not your fault. Never think that it is.’

‘But I should’ve known. Shouldn’t I? You said it. The other night. When I was ill.’

‘No. No, no, no. Neither of us knew, did we? If you’d known, you would’ve said something. We could’ve kept you safe.’ His fingers traced her palm, a figure eight, over and over. Infinity.

She shifted her eyes to the ceiling. Of course she had suspected. She could admit that to herself now. She just hadn’t wanted it to be true. She was too busy; they both were. There was no time for anything other than landing their biggest client to date.

Would the words come out?

‘Arash, I’ve got to –’

‘Shhh. You shouldn’t upset yourself.’ His finger moved up to her face and ran lightly along her mouth, a gesture she remembered from their first date. ‘There was nothing you could have done. Your dad said it was just one of those things. It happens. It’s a common thing.’

What about the last few weeks? Long hours at the office, the odd glass of wine after work. Going to the gym or for a run every other day. She knew her period was a little late; her cycle was usually slightly different each month, according to one of the apps on her phone. Shouldn’t she have known? Thought to take a pregnancy test? Gone to the doctor?

Arash spoke again. ‘Miscarriages are more common than you think. Than I’d thought.’

Nila stared at him. Miscarriage. She had held a child within her, then mislaid it.

She closed her eyes.

‘Was it ...?’ she started to ask, but the words would only come in fits and starts. ‘What was it?’

Arash shook his head. ‘We don’t know. You weren’t very ... very far along.’ He swallowed, his Adam’s apple moving up and down.

She thought back to the meeting, and the black hole after that.

‘Arash, I was leaving the office. I was going home How did I get here?’

‘You collapsed. In the foyer. There was an ambulance. They rang me, told me to get there as fast as I could. I saw your message after that, but it didn’t make any sense. So I ran.’ He held his head in his hands, his elbows on his knees. She looked at the top of his head, at the sprinkling of grey hairs among the black. ‘God, why did I leave so early? I was so happy. Too happy. I got carried away. I should’ve waited for you. I shouldn’t have gone to the pub without you.’

‘Arash ...’ she said, but she didn’t know what else to say. He *had* left her, hadn’t he?

But he couldn’t have known.

Not like she’d known.



Heliotrope

Jennifer Nuttall

On every pastel-painted bookcase,
in every compendium of children's lore,
is one page more dogeared than the others -
one tale which captured their young minds more.

The spine is so cracked that the book falls open
to where princesses dare to dance all night
til shoes and feet are worn and tired
and the candle moon tapers the light.

Where low fences mark the boundaries
of the places that magic and nature meet:
where fairies live among the flowers
with leafwork dresses and naked feet,

Or, as voices rise to cheer the future
and snow begins to fall outside,
twelve familiar strangers step off a coach:
a brand new year personified.

And with my elbows to the floor,
head in hands and palms to cheeks,
absorbed within this other world
is where the magic first found me.

I realised that I could make
the walls within my bedroom move;
write magic onto life itself;
build fairies where the flowers bloom...

So, wide-eyed dragons cut through clouds
with wings of words printed in crayon,
and pencil monsters stalked the edges
of the schoolyards that I played on.

By thirteen I had cast out fairies
but kept the magic of the words
to try to find out who I was
and draw a map to where it hurt.

There, reams of paper and verse about shadows,
moonlight with teeth and metaphoric ghosts.
A diagram of rhyming angst
and tie-dyed adolescent woes.

[...]

Now, in my supposed adulthood,
I write myself much more refined -
No space left for clichés like dragons;
There's reason when I rhyme.

This line says I know who I am now;
Where I started and what I've been through.
This desk looks out on winter concrete
and I see *heliotrope* in June.

The Gods of Gwynfa Road

Daniel Whelan

Stop the Clocks

For the first time in nearly two hundred years, Dai Clocks had a cold.

The last time it had happened, during the reign of Queen Victoria, he had not needed to bother his scrying glass until long after he had recovered. That had been a boom time for the seaside town to which he had retired shortly after the Great Fire of London, but his situation was different now. He had bills to pay. He had been granted an extraordinarily long life in exchange for his services as an oracle, but had not been given a fortune to match. So it was that he dragged himself from his bed before dawn and slipped on the ceremonial robe: a garment which had been pleasingly cool in the Mediterranean climes of his youth, but was barely better than nudity on the North Wales coast during what people nowadays insisted on calling the ‘twenty-first’ century. He sighed, ran a hand through his dyed black quiff, put on his spectacles, and made his way down the stairs, through his shop – where the reassuring ticks of dozens of watches kept beautiful, precise time – and out through the icy cold yard to his workshop.

‘Dai Clocks’ was not his real name, of course, but a nickname earned over time. He’d given up pointing out it was wrong, though it pained him still. He was a watchmaker, and accuracy was important to him: he’d never fixed a clock in his life.

He let himself into the little shed, flicked on the tiny electric heater by the door, and sat at his workbench. He carefully cleared away the dead and dying watches awaiting his attention, and slid open the long middle drawer. He took out the scrying glass, thin and flat and as dirty and irregular as a frozen puddle, and placed it on the bench.

He took a deep breath, and rubbed his hands together before stretching them out over the glass. ‘Right then,’ he said, in the thick, nasal North Walian accent he’d picked up over the centuries. ‘Let’s see now.’

And then he sneezed.

Droplets of snot sprayed over the surface of the stone. ‘Gods damn it,’ he said, though with his blocked nose it sounded more like ‘gerdammed’. He shook his head, pulled the sleeve of his robe over his hand and wiped the glass clean. Then he reached out over it once more, and in the most sonorant voice he could muster on two Lemsips, chanted:

‘Open, gaping Void of Chaos, open,
For Chronos, eternal lord of Time,
Hath granted me the right to endless sight,
And I demand to see all that will be.’

He fished around inside his robe and pulled out a crumpled, beer-stained piece of file paper. He squinted at it in the poor light. ‘Specifically, the winner of the three-thirty at

Chester, and the final score at Cefn Druids vs. New Saints on Tuesday week. Oh, and any five of the winning numbers for Wednesday's lottery.' Dai Clocks was not a greedy man, but watchmaking was not a very lucrative business.

The glass did nothing.

'Oh, come on. Be a mate. I'm full of flu, I am.'

The glass still did nothing.

Dai peered over it, and saw only his reflection: his nose comically oversized, his sideburns appearing to meet at his chin, like he was staring into the underside of a spoon. He sighed, cleared his throat, and repeated the incantation:

'Open, gaping Void of chaos, open,
For Chronos —'

And then he sneezed again. Immediately a flash of light rippled over the glass's surface.

'Right, there you are, then. No messing about now. Let's be having you.'

'No,' rasped the glass. It spoke in Ancient Greek.

Dai stuck a finger in his ear and wriggled it about. This was new. Usually the glass showed him the future, then he wrote down the results and went about his day. It had never made a sound before. Perhaps he had taken too many cold remedies. While he pondered this strange turn of events – ancient magical artifacts rarely, if ever, received upgrades – the glass began to rattle impatiently. Dai put his hand down to steady it, but as soon as his palm made contact with the glass a jolt of electricity passed through his body and threw him at the window. It shattered, and Dai slid down the wall and came to a slump in front of the portable heater.

A torrent of browns and greys gushed out of the glass, splitting it into three pieces. Jets of muddied colour shot into the air, twisting around each other, tightening into something large, terrible, and completely invisible to the human eye.

But Dai Clocks was not human. At least, not entirely. So he saw before him a malnourished giant with overgrown, matted hair and a beard down to his toes. The giant lurched forward, juices dripping from his jaws. He had to hunch over to fit into the confines of the workshop, thrusting his gloopy, still-forming face at Dai as the watchmaker scrambled backwards.

The giant stopped, snorting great gusts of foul breath out of his nostrils, ruffling Dai's quiff. His face settled, at which point Dai became very afraid indeed.

'It's you,' Dai said, in Ancient Greek. 'But ... Zeus trapped you in the Void.'

'YOU LET ME OUT.'

'No I didn't.'

'YET HERE I AM.' The giant paused, and sniffed the air. 'WHERE ARE THE OLYMPIANS? WHERE ARE THE OTHER DEATHLESS GODS?'

'Dead,' said Dai.

'IMPOSSIBLE,' said the giant.

'You've been shut away for hundreds of thousands of years. The earth is different now. Can't you feel it? You're not believed in any more. None of the Deathless Gods are. You'll barely last a day. If you give me a few hours to fix my scrying glass I can send you safely back to the Void —'

'NEVER.'

'But you don't even have a Pantheon. You'll disappear without a body.'

The giant smiled, revealing decaying green teeth with bits of rotting flesh stuck between them. 'YOU'VE GOT A BODY.'

'Not bloody likely,' said Dai, pawing around for something he could use as a weapon.

His hand connected with something solid and he brought it up over his head, ready. 'Get back,' he said. 'Get back, I'm warning you ...'

The giant squinted at the thing in Dai's hand. Dai looked up and saw he was holding his portable heater. The giant lashed out, swiping Dai to one side. Dazed, Dai got to his feet and staggered back to the heater. Clutching it to his chest, he brought his free arm up, his fingers splayed, and he began to mutter something over and over again. Each word hit the giant like a slingshot, and he recoiled, hissing. Still, Dai did not stop muttering, and each syllable drove the giant screeching backwards, until in blind desperation he lashed out, grabbed hold of Dai, and slammed him into the floor.

Dai stopped mumbling. The heater fell out of his hand. The giant roared in victory, and leaned over Dai, drool dripping from his chin.

Dai smiled. 'Time's up,' he wheezed.

The heater began to hop from one leg to another. The giant stared at it. Suddenly the giant's feet were yanked from under him, and he landed on his back. The tiny heater roared like a jet engine, and the giant looked on in horror as his rapidly disappearing legs were sucked into it in a rush of muddy, spectral colour. He dug his fingers into the floor, wringing into ever stranger shapes, unable to resist as the heater sucked him up.

Dai watched until the giant's bulging, confused eyes disappeared into the tiny grill, and the heater came to a stop. He tried to pull himself toward his workbench, but every part of him hurt, and the workbench seemed so far away. With the last of his strength, he daubed something on the floor, then lay still.

Dawn stretched her fingers across the sky, as red as a man's insides.



Old Wounds

Charlie Wrigg

The life is leaking out of him.

Clutching at the red mess of himself, his mind wanders. Picking through the jagged gem-like pieces of memory: a life of sheep and bullfights. Simpler. Easier. Alexander, they called him. He looked into the cool pools of the nymph Oenone's eyes and saw himself: Paris the Fair. Paris the Wise.

* * *

Later.

The lie is revealed and he is sitting by his kingly father's side at a feast. A celebration for *him*. He watches the woman that tore him from her breast; the man in the great crown who plucked at the cord of his life, raised the scythe, and faltered only for weakness; the sisters and brothers who snicker and whisper about his pretty looks and womanly hands which wrap around a bow, not a sword. And Hector. Shining, laughing Hector stuffed fat and full and golden with their parents' love.

Paris, the faggot twined with fiery serpents, sips his wine and thinks. He thinks on an apple, a goddess's winged words. She sighed a name so blissful, so obscene, he could almost taste it: *Helen*.

* * *

Later.

Thinking he saw the glint of reflection in her face: the hardness of her eyes, the false papercut of her smile while Menelaus and other lordly men roared and boasted, unaware of fingers tangling beneath the table.

When they fucked, they fucked in hate.

Venom ran hot through his veins, but Helen's hate went down deep, deep into a pool of darkest black, of mud clinging to the banks of the Styx. He had not known such hate existed. He saw it in the crook of her lips while she pleaded guilty at his father's feet, in the savage jabs of her needle when the Greeks and the Trojans began to bleed, in the passion of their love-making when the hate began to fester like an old wound.

And he loved her for it.

* * *

Now.

'Oenone will not heal you.'

The past kaleidoscopes with the present. It is Helen talking. *Gods*. Her beauty was always a thing of horror; now it is a thing of savagery. White skin flush with exhaustion, marred by gore, yet still thrumming with the vitality of a god. Begging to be touched.

It takes a moment for him to realise her meaning. She went to Oenone. For *him*. And now he is dead. They both know it, but when he prises apart his lips to speak, she shushes him.

‘I don’t want to hear your death rattle, Husband.’

Husband. Always said with that edge of scorn. He tries to speak anyway, to relay some final message, some confirmation that it was worth it, that he regrets nothing.

But then the cord snaps, and he dies.

* * *

After.

Helen gently wraps him in the tapestry woven with their story, with ten years of pain and misery and war. His death shroud. She watches the way it laps up his leaking blood, and thinks, *Ah yes. It is finished now. The red completes it.*

Then she looks at the pretty face of her second husband, second in prettiness only to herself, and finds the man who once undressed her with his eyes and thought he knew her. But he saw only an emptiness with which to fill himself. She traces his lips with tenderness. Then spits on him. And cries.

Eriphyle

Madeline Hoffman

Prologue

I am the murdered daughter of a murdered son. Tragedy has shaded my life, before it ever happened. I live in a forest of trees. A hundred thousand trees, last numbered, and growing, though we are already dead. We are descended from the murdered ones, and we are the trees of lives that cannot be.

My brother would have you forget and move on. Tragedies happen every day, and you cannot hold them all in your mind. But you feel it in your bones. You wonder why a bright light feels shaded. Why your joy has an underside from pain you never lived. And then you look to the trees and remember. Generations upon generations of people that cannot be. Dying every generation that never was. Living in a time you cannot see.

We are the progeny.



1

The myths we tell shape the contours of our lives. That's what Brandy said. She believed it, had spent her career endeavoring to prove it. It's the reason I wanted to work with her.

My advisor, Professor Brandy Lindquist, specializes in the overlaps between myth and history. She was pretty involved in the research that linked the legend of Troy to an actual architectural site. It's big money in the Classics world. I mean, relatively. Classics are kind of a rum deal if you're looking for financial success. But Brandy was looking to change all that. And as her advisee, change started with me. She was a marvelously imposing woman, with a lipstick collection that spanned the rainbow and corded arms that she attributed to a strong yoga practice. She wore exclusively tweed, which was decently sensible in Chicago in the fall, but a pretty aggressive statement in the summer. I was willing to research anything Brandy told me to. The selection of my thesis topic went something like this:

'I'd like you to research historical grounding for the Theban plague in Oedipus Tyrannus.'

'Okay.'

Then Brandy hurried out of the room, towards some meeting for chairs, or funding, or trustees, and I was left sitting between two towering stacks of journal proofs. I decided to be impressed with her efficiency and went to the library.

The Regenstein Library was one of my favorite places to hang out – not least because the air conditioning was always cranked up, which made wearing my own Brandy-inspired tweed vaguely bearable. The Classics stacks in the Reg – and this is true of every Classics section in every library across the world – was the stuffiest, dustiest, brownest corner of the whole UChicago campus. At the beginning of the semester I had taken to leaving my notes and a clandestine stash of cookies tucked behind a huge, Greek language copy of the *Bibliotheca of Pseudo-Apollodorus* for late night studying. They were always untouched when I returned.

After grabbing my notebook and an Oreo, I settled into one of the stiff, straight-backed chairs and opened my laptop to begin my research and what do you know, Brandy was right, there was a historical basis for the plague mentioned in Sophocles' *Oedipus*. You know the story of Oedipus, roughly at least – man murders his father (accidentally), marries his mother (accidentally), and the city of Thebes suffers under plague until it's all sorted out. There's some light gouging involved towards the end. It's a classic tale about the fruitlessness of trying to escape your fate; or, less pessimistically, how you can't always control your destiny. The story holds up pretty well, though I wouldn't recommend getting hung up on the specifics. Everything is a metaphor.

Like the Theban plague, which in Sophocles' version of *Oedipus* is supposedly caused by all the incest and patricide. Historically, though, the plague Sophocles wrote into the play was based on a plague that was happening in Athens in his lifetime, around 430 BCE. Which was about a thousand years after the time that Oedipus might actually have lived. So the Theban plague is a complete invention – it's just a writer imposing the events of their time on the story they're writing. The plague is Sophocles' way of talking about Athenian politics, which he wanted to criticize. Plagues often follow bad leadership in stories of Ancient Greece.

But Brandy is brilliant, and I figured she knew that, so I kept going. I spent the next few weeks in the library having a merry time trying to understand Brandy's brilliance. In

January, she called me to her office to check in. I told her about Sophocles' invention (I was right, she had known), and how it seemed there had been some destabilizing events at the time, but that it might have been more environmental or economic than plague based. A historically-placed Oedipus would have potentially lived a thousand years before Sophocles, a little before the collapse of the Bronze Age. There are studies about earthquakes occurring at the time, and a refugee crisis, and also possible soil depletion, and it all ends in collapse somehow, but it's very much an unsolved question.

Brandy heard me out and encouraged me to keep going in 'that direction'. I wasn't exactly sure what direction that was, but I'm a good speaker, and I think I made it sound like I actually knew what I was talking about.

There are disadvantages to having your heroes be your mentors. Or at least, there are when you're twenty-two and haven't yet realized what a mess everyone else is. Brandy talked a lot about the power of individual thought, and I was kind of embarrassed to admit none of my thoughts were original. Every time I had some novel reaction to *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad*, I could find at least ten books dissecting exactly that thought with more depth and nuance than I could ever hope to cultivate. It made living my dream – studying classics! At the University of Chicago! – a bit more deflating than one would hope. Every day I read about people who had already done all the things worth doing. Classic story, right?

* * *

After my meeting with Brandy, I walked home the long way, following a stretch of green on 59th before cutting over to Hyde Park, and stressing the whole way.

At that time I lived in Monarch House, a brownstone walkup that had been repurposed into a semi-cooperative social living space. The house had three bathrooms, one kitchen, a living room, and fifteen bedrooms, ranging from studio attic to glorified closet. My room was on the second floor, a cozy corner 'L' filled with a desk and three mismatched wardrobes, two of which were overflowing with books.

Whenever I'm researching a new topic I get really excited and check out an unrealistic number of books, take them home, and only read the first chapter of, like, three of them. I like the vibe of overflowing piles of books. In the midst of my aspirational book towers I had managed to fit a small, banged-up leather sofa, courtesy of some previous tenant. The mattress was stuffed behind the one wardrobe half-filled with clothes.

I unloaded my latest stack of books into a pile under the window. Behind the tacked-up striped cloth that served as my curtain, the house's neglected vegetable garden was visible. The house had voted to put more effort into the garden last fall, but our bluff wouldn't really be called until planting season. The cold of Chicago's winters gave us several more weeks of justifiable inaction, so the patch was still filled with the twisted remains of last year's attempt. The browned stems of a stunted blackberry bush poked through the leaves like a tiny frostbitten obelisk of death. It was kind of beautiful, in a dilapidated sort of way. This could be said of a lot of aspects of Monarch House.

I stepped away from the window as a distant ringing began to sound its way through the house. I grabbed my water bottle and thumped back down the worn wooden stairs, nearly bumping into Kyle on his way up. We did a sort of half-dance trying to get around each other that ended with Kyle picking me up under the arms and setting me on the platform behind him.

'You skipping out on the meeting?' I asked him, eyeing his upwards retreat.

'Naw, just need to change real quick. Save me a spot?'

'Course. Don't you dare bail – I need you in there.' I had to shout the last bit as the

ringing intensified around us. Joel appeared at the bottom of the stairs, a thick black beanie pulled low over his ears, bell in hand.

‘Meeting time! Up and at ‘em!’ he yelled, marching up past us to reach the southside bedroom hallway. I grimaced at Kyle and, ears ringing, hurried down the stairs.

The weekly house meeting was always held in the living room, a sort of forced if-you’re-here-then-you-should-be-HERE move to encourage attendance. Even so, when I arrived downstairs, only two other residents were there, sunken into the faded, overly-squished couches that filled the room on three sides. I nodded at Hugo on the mustard velvet loveseat and Jared on the striped, green camelback sofa, fiddling with a pen left on a stripped side-table as residents trickled in. By 6:30 we had eight residents assembled – a decent turnout.

At 6:31, Joel settled himself into the recliner at the *de facto* head of the room and raised his voice above the chatter.

‘Shall we begin?’ he asked, looking over at Aussie sitting next to Ian on the loveseat. Above them, a cloudy whiteboard had ‘Spring Party,’ ‘Vegetable Garden,’ and ‘Amazon Delivery,’ scrawled on it in three different messy handwritings. I recognized Miles’ handwriting on the board and felt my stomach tighten. He and Aussie could argue for England, if one of them was English. As it was, Aussie wasn’t even Australian. When they lived in Spain for a semester, their friends thought they were, though, and gave them the nickname. When they got home, the name stuck – with a great deal of help on Aussie’s part, to be fair. They introduced themselves exclusively by the new name nowadays. The name suited them – all long limbs and easy smiles. The only time it was absent was during these meetings. Aussie glanced up at the whiteboard, down at their laptop, clacked about for a minute, and nodded for us to begin.

The house – several generations of inhabitants ago – had voted to follow *Robert’s Rules of Order* for greatest efficiency. It could be a bit formulaic for a discussion on planning a costume party, but it kept us organized. The year before, we had roundly rejected Joel’s proposition to formulate a revised *Rules* for house use.

People ask me why I study the Classics sometimes – not always directly, but it feels implied in the *really?* I get when I mention the focus for my master’s. And then I’ll spout something about continuing legacies and foundations for Western Thought and great storytelling that hopefully makes some degree of sense, but that isn’t actually my answer. What I have trouble explaining to strangers is that the Classics, to me, are like a case study on humanity. The stories aren’t the only version of how things work – in fact, they’re frequently stories of what definitely doesn’t work. But they’re a representation of one version of how life could be. When you’re uncertain about how any life should be, it’s nice to be able to read a story that is like: *this is an option*. It might be a bad option, but it’s there, and accepting or rejecting it is useful. It’s how we build on the past, right?

Which is all to say, that – as Joel ran us through reports from standing committees – I was thinking more about the Mycenaean palatial system than Cindy’s update on the organization of the thrift corner.

The palatial system made for a set of absolutist, collectivist states, with extra bits of feudalism thrown in. Basically, most people in Greece before the collapse of the Bronze Age labored in highly regimented work groups near giant palaces, with all the administration run by paternalistic royals and some scribes.

The palace distributed food, clothing, and medicine, and the work groups farmed and cooked and produced goods like cloth and olive oil for trade. We know a lot about it because the Mycenaeans were obsessed with recording inventory and transactions on tablets. Ultimate bureaucratic state. It worked well as far as ensuring people had their basic bodily needs met,

and terribly if you valued free choice for anyone beyond the royal families.

It reminded me a lot of living in Monarch House, with all the goods gathered in one place, then distributed back out again. We paid rent together, cooked food together. I'm sure if Cindy thought she could get enough votes for pressing olives, she would create a committee for that, too. Theoretically, though, we all had the opportunity to live in the palace and have a say. Which yeah, made us more of a commune than a palace, but communes only work if everyone agrees to the same rules. It's not a system that weathers economic upheaval especially well. Which ended up being another similarity to Mycenaean Greece, though I didn't learn that until later.

Idolatry

Charlie Wrigg

Father Fairchild was a man who *wanted*.

As a boy, his gran had told him often, and with all the conviction of a preacher, that life was like a ladder.

‘Always reach for the next rung, my lad,’ she said. ‘You’ve only got yourself. No bugger else is going to help you, I’ll tell you that.’

It was a deeply rooted, weed-like thing, this thing inside of him. It cajoled him, drove him, bullied him into spaces and places others said he had no right to be. But there was a view at the top of that ladder, and Father Fairchild was going to see it.

Freshly minted in new garb of the Catholic Church, the young priest glowed with youth, overripe and all ashiver with possibility. Vatican City was dark and sleepy, the sky pinkly drunk with morning hours. Few people milled around.

Father Fairchild made a sharp turn into an alleyway.

Johan was waiting for him.

‘Looky, looky, it’s our chosen priest!’

Father Fairchild affected a pleasant expression. He had never liked Johan. There was a whiff of ex-military about him.

They ducked through a low doorway. There were no lights and it smelled of damp. Johan lit a match.

‘Lights blew out,’ he explained. ‘I think the bloody thing likes being in the dark.’

‘Where was it found?’ asked Father Fairchild.

‘Rwanda.’

‘Any sightings?’

‘Just a few savages. It’s fine,’ said Johan, sensing Father Fairchild’s disapproval. ‘No one will take any notice of ‘em. They’ll put it down to voodoo shit.’

‘They’re not savages, Johan,’ chastised Father Fairchild. ‘And voodoo is as sacred to them as Christ is to us.’

‘What, sticking pins in dolls?’ Johan laughed at Father Fairchild’s displeased silence. ‘Alright, alright, boss. I’ll behave.’

They came to a locked door. There were two men outside. They held guns.

The guards knew to expect Father Fairchild – they were called ahead of time – but ritual is an intrinsic part of worship. Father Fairchild produced a thick piece of writing paper. At the bottom was a leaden seal.

The guards let him through.

The room inside was a contradiction. Old wood panels and carvings inlaid with gold leaf jostled with instruments of science: bubbling glass tanks, beeping machines, vials of blood, a large microscope, and enough computers to rival a space station.

A woman in a lab coat rose to meet them. She looked exhausted.

‘Any change?’ asked Father Fairchild.

‘It’s the same as the others,’ she replied. ‘All the tests suggest it’s human.’

‘And it asked for me? Specifically?’

‘Plain as day. It’s the first time one of them has said something different.’

‘The others speak?’

‘Barely, just the same thing over and over.’ She fingered a silver cross at her throat.

‘And it’s always in unison. When one speaks, they all speak. I was beginning to suspect they shared a single consciousness until ...’ Her eyes flicked to him.

Father Fairchild nodded solemnly. ‘Thank you, Meira. I will see it now.’

He moved smoothly into the room, passing the flashing lights and blinking monitors, to a vast tank of pale green liquid. Inside, was a man. His skin was black, his hair darker than jet, each cheek brushed with fluttering lashes and three beads of scar tissue. The body was finely corded with sinuous muscle, the shoulders strong, the back curved like a bow, its positioning almost fetal. Father Fairchild followed the lines of his body until he came to the shoulder blades, marred by two large, twisted bumps which continued on and on into six pairs of white wings. All of him, limb, body, wing, was covered in slow-blinking eyes. They all swiveled at once to fix on Father Fairchild.

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

The creature opened its human eyes.

Immediately, images flooded Father Fairchild’s mind: plush lips pressed desperately to thighs, the salty taste of sweat and skin, bodies moving in rhythm, the wet slide of hands and fingers, and the needy voice rising out of his chest like a prayer – *more more more*.

The images stopped. Father Fairchild sagged back to reality as though dropped from a great height, his breath ragged, his heart hammering.

The creature opened its mouth.

‘Do you know me?’

‘Father?’ Meira’s voice was concerned, but Father Fairchild paid little attention. His hand moved into a shaky cross.

‘Do you know me?’

‘Father Fairchild, what is it talking about?’

‘It’s human, Meira,’ he said, voice almost a whisper. ‘Not like a human. *Human.*’

‘Do you know me?’

‘Yes,’ he breathed. ‘I know you.’

Father Fairchild was a man who *wanted*, and before he had wanted influence and power and God’s love, he had wanted Freddie Wise. And now here he was, turned into ... this. He pulled himself up, tentative, and laid a hand against the glass. The creature mirrored him.

‘Freddie?’ he whispered.

‘Hello, Harry.’

‘What –’ Father Fairchild tried again. ‘What happened to you?’

‘The words. When we parted. You told me the words. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.’ The creature smiled. It was a smile Father Fairchild

had known intimately at one time. *‘I found God.’*

Lydia

Joshua Wicks

Lydia opened her eyes and smiled. The blue morning sunshine was peeking under her dinosaur curtains and onto her face, warming up her cold cheekies. She wiggled her nose like Peter Rabbit, giggled, and hugged Teddy Dinosaur tight.

‘Did you sleep okay?’ she asked him.

He had.

‘Good.’ She patted him on his little head. ‘Time to get up, then.’

Teddy Dinosaur agreed.

Lydia kicked down her covers and shot right up without a yawn or a stretch. She stood on top of her pink bed and posed like Supergirl, making her thinking face.

‘Hm. What to do first?’

Blip.

‘Drippy drops,’ she said, bouncing her legs.

One then two, she grabbed her dinosaur curtains with both handies and marched along her bed to open them. Left, right, left, right. She turned and saluted Teddy Dinosaur and then plonked her handies down onto her windowsill.

Please be snow. Please be snow.

She looked down over her concrete garden and up and out at the grassy field with the playtime park sitting in the middle of it.

No snow. Not even a sprinkle.

‘Nevermind. We can still go out on the swings after school,’ she said to Teddy Dinosaur.

He liked the sound of that.

‘Not at night-time, though. That’s when the noisy men with their ciggies are there.’

Lydia pretended to suck on a ciggie and blow out smoke, just like Mummy did.

Blip.

‘Oh. Drippy drops.’ Lydia rolled her eyes. ‘Silly me. So forgetful.’

The drippy drops were all snuggled up in the bottom corner of her bedroom window, like bubble wrap. She pointed her pointy-finger to make a spear, stomped her middle finger twice, and made a neigh-neigh noise.

‘Charge.’ She galloped her handy at the drippy drops. ‘Jab. Jab. Jab. Pop. Pop. Pop.’ The drippy drops burst and fell, wriggling down to their doom. She pressed her pointy-finger into one and dragged it down onto the windowsill, mixing it into the spilt compost.

Mummy says the compost was mould, but she didn’t know what she was talking about.

Squawk. Squawk. Squawk. A black shadow flew past Lydia’s bedroom window, making her jump and slip onto her bottom. She pulled a frowny face and picked herself back up.

‘Noisy birds.’ Slowly, she looked out of her window and saw a big fat crow sitting on Bob-next-door’s back fence. It had a sassy look on its face. *Squawk.*

'Naughty crow. Shush.' Lydia slapped her finger to her lips.

She froze.

It burned. It burned from her mouth and down to her chin and did nasty tingles along her jaw. Everything under her cheekies beat like when she was bleeding. Like when everything around a cut throbbed and ached.

She remembered last night. Daddy's angry face. His angry fist coming towards her. He'd hit her. He'd wanted to. To hurt her.

Lydia's legs turned wobbly and the lump that meant she was going to cry appeared in her throat.

Don't cry. Be a big girl.

She sniffled. Gently, she touched her lip. If there was bleeding, then she needed to clean it before Mummy saw. She thought it would feel wet straight away, but it didn't. Dry. She checked her finger. Nothing.

Why is it still hurting!?

She touched around again. Just underneath her lip, there was a small ball like a spot that felt more like a smartie. She pressed it lightly and her handy squeezed into a fist. It stung like a bee sting.

Swollen. Mummy's going to get mad. She's not going to let me go to school.

Lydia's chest went even tighter like something was sitting on it, and she breathed faster and faster, so loud that she could hear her breaths echoing around her bedroom. She didn't want to touch the smartie anymore, but the throbbing wouldn't stop. She could tell the smartie wasn't what was making the throbbing, though.

Don't be scared. You need to find what the throbbing is. Then you can fix it.

She checked around the smartie, over her lip and then down onto her chin. She moved her finger as slow as possible but her handy was shaking, so she was extra careful. The closer she went to her chin, the more it made nasty tingles.

Then, she felt it. Something horrible.

Lydia pulled her handy away and her legs went so wobbly that she knew she was going to fall over. She put her other handy on the windowsill to make sure she didn't and moved her pointy-finger back to her face.

The bump started on her chin and kept going and going, until it stopped by her neck. It was like a bug was living under her skin. A big beetle. The middle of her chin was crispy, too, which meant there was a cut.

She couldn't fix this. Her handy was shaking so much that she had to put it down.

Lydia saw Daddy's fist again. Hitting her on her lip. Remembered herself falling into the bannister and smacking the end of her chin. She'd cried as soon as she'd got back up.

She couldn't breathe anymore. She tried to sip the air in as fast she could, but it didn't help.

Don't cry. Don't wake Mummy and Daddy up.

She could feel the bump without touching it. Like it was pulling on her chin.

Her tummy did crampies and she grabbed and pushed on it as hard as she could and looked up at the ceiling and counted the white swishy-swirlies there.

The hurting still wouldn't go away. The throbbing.

Daddy did this. Why did Daddy want to hurt me? Maisie's daddy doesn't hurt her.

She couldn't hold it in anymore. She needed to let it out. To scream and make the hurting go away.

No. No. No. I don't want to. I don't want to. Please make it go away. Please.

Then she remembered Mummy's magic spell, which she said every time she bumped herself.

‘Shh. Shh-it.’ Lydia knew it was a bad word, but Mummy was always happier after saying it. ‘Shit. Shit. Shit.’

Lydia kept casting the spell over and over.

Her tummy did more crampies, so she quickly picked up Teddy Dinosaur and cuddled him, rocking back and forth.

‘Shit. Shit. Shit.’

She didn’t know how long she said the spell for, but she did until her mouth went dry and she started to feel a little dizzy from rocking on her tootsies.

Eventually, the burning stopped and the throbbing turned into stinging. It didn’t sting as bad as the smartie. Then the stinging turned into aching. Aching was okay. Aching didn’t make her want to be sick or cry.

Finally, even the aching stopped and she felt brave enough to wag her chin.

Nothing. No more hurting. It had all gone, even the feeling of the bump hanging on her chin.

She breathed out heavily from her mouth and rested her nose on Teddy Dinosaur’s little head. He smelt like Weetabix.

‘Thank you,’ Lydia whispered, giving him a peck.

He was all trembly in her hands.

‘It’s okay. I’ve got you.’

* * *

Lydia spotted her rainforest watch on top of her pile of school clothes next to her bed. The big branch was just past the twelve, and the little branch on the seven.

Mummy and Daddy will be getting out of bed when the big branch is on the six.

‘Still time for play,’ she said to Teddy Dinosaur. She tucked him back into bed and gave him one last peck. ‘Need to be super speedy.’

She pointed her tippy toes and stepped down from her bed.

‘Ooh.’

The floor was freezing.

‘The cold never bothered me anyway,’ she sang, quietly.

She shuffled out of her pink, stegosaurus pyjamas and pulled on her pants, red school jumper, black skirt, and then found her grey leggings at the end of her bed under her covers.

‘Naughty leggings. What are you doing under there?’

She put one handy in the air and rubbed her fingers together, imagining she was sprinkling magic dust all over her and transforming like Cinderella for the ball.

Ready.

Off she went out through her bedroom doorway and onto the landing. She made sure her tootsies only touched the hush-hush parts of the floor that wouldn’t make a squeaky or a grumble and slid her handy over the scruffy wall. She whooshed past the stairs, making a handy-plane, and went round into the bathroom.

Her tippy-toes curled up on the tiles, colder than her bedroom floor. Too cold. She hurried and pulled her steppy-uppy wash basket out from under the sink and hopped onto it, then rested her handies on the sink.

She stopped, not looking in the mirror.

The bump.

Lydia didn’t know where to look, so she stared at the orange bits on the tap.

What if it’s bad? What if Mummy can see it?

She thought of what to do.

Maybe if I brush my hair all pretty like Rapunzel's, then I can hide it from Mummy. Then I get to go to school.

Yep. That's what I'll do.

Lydia held her breath and closed her eyes.

One. Two. Three. Open.

Her chin was fat, with a bright red line in the middle. The cut. The rest of her chin was sickly yellow with black, purply splodges. The colour around her mouth seemed normal, but the corner of her lip was swollen. The smartie. It had little red dots on it. She lifted her head up. One half of her chin dropped lower than the other like a water balloon. The bump.

Lydia could hear the steppy-uppy wash basket rattling under her and realised her legs were wobbling again.

I can't hide this. I'm going to get in trouble. Mummy's going to shout.

She remembered that film Daddy had watched on TV one night. The one for grown-ups. Past her bedtime. She'd seen it from the bottom of the stairs. There was a man sitting next to a sink and his face was all bruised and puffy. A bad man. Another man with a beard was punching the bad man again and again and asking him questions.

What if Daddy wanted me to look like that? Like the bad man on the TV. I hadn't been bad, though.

Her lip went pouty and trembly and she looked down at her tootsies.

Lydia shook her head.

No. I'm not bad. I'm a big girl. And if I cry then there's no play.

She did a big sniff in, as hard as she could, and picked up Mummy's hairbrush.

'We need to hide this,' she said to the hairbrush.

Lydia started brushing, going lighter near the bump, making sure her hair flowed as long as possible. She did it so her hair hung down like curtains in front of her face, just enough so she could still see properly. She made the bottom swish in, so the bump was covered more.

Next, she grabbed her crocodile toothbrush, Sir Snappy, and squeezed on some toothpaste. She opened her mouth as wide as she could so the toothbrush wouldn't bump her lip, which stung a little but not too bad.

She started brushing her teeth and had never brushed them so slowly, not really touching them either. It hurt the most when she had to reach her teeth at the back and Sir Snappy's tail kept jabbing her lip right next to where the smartie was. She stretched her mouth wider and toothpaste slipped out and onto her red school jumper.

'Oops.' She scooped it off with her finger and smushed it into the plug hole.

Now there was a white mark on her jumper, mixed up with the different coloured pen ones and yoghurt ones. Lydia happy sniffed.

Messy me.

When she couldn't keep her mouth open for any longer, she let the toothpaste drop from her mouth into the sink. Plop. She went to rinse, then thought about the water touching the bump.

Don't rinse. Might make more hurting.

She popped Sir Snappy back in his pot and looked in the mirror. Her hair hadn't stayed in place. The bits that had made her feel itchy, too.

Lydia squeezed her handies together.

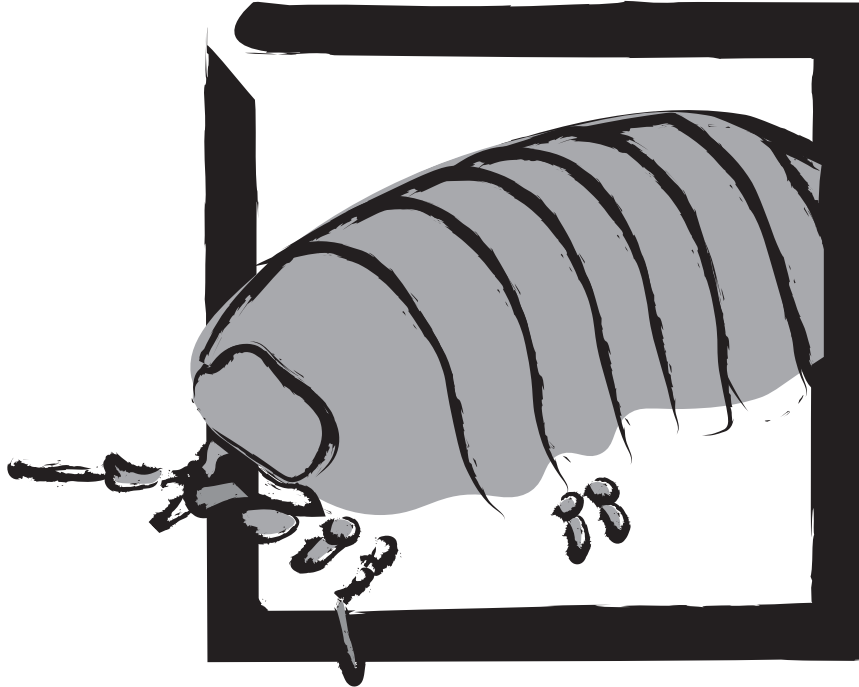
If Maisie or Mrs Goddard see, then everyone will know Daddy hurt me.

She looked at Mummy's makeup bag.

Not allowed makeup. Maybe if I wish hard enough for it, the bump will go away before school.

Lydia closed her eyes and criss-crossed her fingers.
'Please be gone before school. Please be gone before school. Please, please, please.'
She opened her eyes and kissed her fingertips, then touched the mirror where her bump was.

Everything's going to be okay.



Time for play.

Lydia went out of the bathroom, then squinted.

She couldn't see anything and put her handy in front of her eyes. The blue morning sunshine was now orange morning sunshine. It shined in from her bedroom window, through her bedroom doorway, and all over the landing.

Lydia turned around. The sunshine made her ears nice and toasty.

Thank you, sunshine.

She put her handy on the wall next to Mummy and Daddy's bedroom door, made sure her feet were on the hush-hush parts of the floor, and started walking backwards. She had to concentrate extra hard, so she couldn't do any handy-planes.

Her handy touched her bedroom door which was leaning on the grumbler cupboard, its handle still bent and Mummy's red wine still splattered over it. Lydia shook her head.

Daddy needs to fix that.

She had asked him to fix it the other night because she didn't like looking into the landing at night. It was all dark and spooky and the radiators made growling noises. But Daddy hadn't.

Lydia stepped into her bedroom and twirled out of the sunshine, then went to her purple *Dora the Explorer* school bag and unzipped it. She ruffled around until she could feel her colouring pencils and got them out. Brown, blue, green, and red.

These will do.

When she went back to the landing, she took Caravan Carl from her bedside table. She sat down by the grumbler cupboard and put Caravan Carl in front of her crossed legs, then cupped her ear.

Mummy and Daddy were still asleep. No snoring from Daddy. though.

She waited for a moment, listening in case she heard the creakies that Daddy makes on his floor when he gets out of bed.

She shrugged.

It will be okay.

Lydia gently pinched the corner of the wallpaper where the bottom of the grumbler cupboard joined the skirting board and pulled. The wallpaper stuck a teeny bit, so she tugged it harder and it started lifting. She peeled it right back and folded the corner upwards. Her farm was all cosy underneath, the same as she'd left it.

Good morning, piggy. Good morning, duckies. Hello, baa-baas. You're getting a new friend today.

She held up her colouring pencils, making her thinking face, and chose blue. Then she put it against the wall and started drawing a woof-woof; a big round body because he likes his puddings, a pointy head so he can sniff better, a fluffy tail to sweep the floor with, and short stick legs so he can fit under more things.

Hm. You can have green fur, too. That way, you can hide in the grass better when you're playing hide-and-seek with your new friends.

Lydia even added green grass and green trees all around him. The woof-woof lived in the forest, so he needed his home to sleep sweet and sound tonight.

'I hope I can live on a farm like you when I'm older,' Lydia whispered. 'Mummy says that will never happen, but I'll get a good job and make sure we do. Me, Mummy and Daddy, and all our animal pets. And Maisie; she's my bestest friend.'

Lydia felt something tickle her foot which was on the skirting board. She looked down and saw a chunky woodlouse crawling up her big toe and over the other side.

It's Peter. 'Good morning, Peter.' She put out her handy and waited for him to climb onboard, then lowered him down into the trench between the skirting board and the carpet with all the bits in it. Peter hopped off and went on his way, over a bottle cap from one of Daddy's beers and through a clump of Mummy's hair from when she'd pulled it off her hairbrush.

Peter stopped.

Lydia checked to see what was stopping him, then saw an incy woodlouse down the trench.

Cottontail. I haven't seen you in ages.

Cottontail laid on her back, legs all tucked in and not budging at all.

'It's okay, Peter. It's your little sister. Are you sleeping, Cottontail?'

Lydia gave her a poke with her pointy-finger and Cottontail still didn't budge. Lydia poked her harder, but still nothing. Lydia pulled a frowny face.

Eventually, she understood.

No. Not Cottontail.

She looked at Peter.

He has no one left.

'I'm sorry, Peter. I'll make sure she's kept safe.'

Lydia went to pick up Cottontail so Peter didn't have to look anymore, when suddenly Peter speeded off back down the trench. She didn't think he could move so quick and pulled her tootsy out the way to let him past. He went along and straight under the grumbler cupboard door.

Why did he do that? Maybe he's upset?

Lydia looked back to Cottontail and went to carry on picking her up, but Cottontail's legs were wriggling like crazy. Lydia sat back. They wriggled so much that Cottontail started to spin round and round, faster and faster.

She's stuck.

Lydia carefully flipped Cottontail back onto her legs with her pointy-finger, and Cottontail spun round two more times then went still. Not moving.

'Cottontail?'

Before Lydia could reach out and check on her, Cottontail set off just as speedy as Peter, off towards the grumbler cupboard.

Lydia bounced her knees and smiled. 'You came back to life.'

Cottontail disappeared under the grumbler cupboard door.

'Go tell Peter you're okay.'

Clunk. Mummy and Daddy's bedroom door opened.

February in London

By Madeline Hoffman

I wake to
the barest dusting
of snow,
like powdered sugar
on a gingerbread house.
Surely,
I correct myself,
the sugar
is meant to look
just like this:
a sprinkling
of frost
across tiles, edges
of white fading neatly
into dark squares,
too delicate
and light
to make
a sharp line
or thick blanket.
And yet
the gingerbread forms
the original
in my mind, this snowfall
just a copy.
When did the pantry
become
more real
than the weather?
The snow
doesn't care.
It melted
this afternoon. I guess
we must have eaten it.

Limerence

Charlie Wrigg



The first impression Mr Moon drew of the old woman was one of complete and utter ordinariness. Some old women are like that. They fit in with the scenery like a park bench or a lamppost. They're just there. Mrs Peony was one such old woman.

'There's some money,' said Mr Moon.

'Yes dear, he said there would be.'

'It's not much, mind.'

'Yes dear, he told me to expect that.'

'But it's enough to get by.'

Mrs Peony smiled at him. There was a tinge of pity about it. 'Yes dear, that's what he promised. Didn't you, Lee?'

There was another chair beside the widow, usually reserved for a family member or spouse. Upon it now sat an urn containing the late Mr Peony's ashes. The old woman had brought it with her in an Aldi shopping bag. *A bag for life*. Mr Moon hadn't known what to do when the old woman produced her husband's remains. There wasn't exactly a procedure, so

he'd fallen back on good old fashioned British politeness, which is to say he refused to acknowledge the issue at all.

'I take him out for a bit of sunshine,' said Mrs Peony, noticing Mr Moon's attention. 'Does him a bit of good, some sunshine. Stops the ashes getting all musty.'

Mr Moon smiled tightly and managed a clipped, 'Quite,' before moving on to the reading of the will. It was a modest business. A jade pendant, a collection of books, and the humble sum of twenty thousand pounds.

'It will require you to sign an indemnity, but I'm sure Mr Howe will walk you through that.'

Mr Howe was the actual executor of this case, but he'd called in sick this morning. Their boss, with his perfect, white teeth, had suggested it was just as well: Mrs Peony would probably feel more comfortable around a *familiar face*, after all. Mr Moon had not bothered to expound on the differences between Korean and Chinese identity.

'Thank you, dear,' said Mrs Peony.

Her eyes, Mr Moon saw, were very bright. Like two black pebbles slick with recent rain. They were darkly lashed, too – surprisingly thick – and there was a pleasing blush about her cheeks he hadn't noticed before.

Mr Moon cleared his throat. 'Well, if that's everything, Mrs Peony, I'll see you out –'

'They called it the King of Flowers, you know.'

The vowel hung in Mr Moon's mouth, stuttered to a stop, and curved into a 'What?'

'The peony,' replied Mrs Peony. 'The King of Flowers. A favourite of emperors – my, such gardens!' She sighed. 'All that colour.'

'I ... see.'

'You have a lovely face, dear.' She rose out of her chair and creaked around the desk. 'May I read it for you?'

A short, violent war broke out in Mr Moon. On the one hand, he didn't want old women touching his face (particularly old women who went around carrying their dead husbands) but on the other, his mother raged at him to respect his elders. In the end, as was often the case, his mother won.

Mrs Peony's fingers were deft and soft as they traced over the lines of his face. She smelled of peppermint.

'Have you heard of White Peony, dear? Turn your head this way now, that's it. Such a tall nose!'

'I know peonies do come in white, yes,' replied Mr Moon.

That earned him a laugh. It was a joyful noise. 'No, no, silly boy! That was her name. *Bai Mudan*. White Peony. She was the most beautiful courtesan in all of Luoyang, and the most sought after. Oh the tales she could tell! No woman ever knew how to please a man better, and the *rumours* about her. Tilt your chin please. Thirty men a night, some said. *Fifty*, if she was feeling frisky.'

The old woman laughed and something about it put Mr Moon in mind of a much younger giggle. He blushed. He couldn't help it. Warmth crept up his neck, his palms were sweaty, and he couldn't quite take his eyes off the old woman's lips.

'But in the end, even that wasn't enough,' continued the woman.

'What happened to her?'

'Hmm? Oh, you know how these old stories are, dear. No two endings ever add up. In some provinces they say she died. Others say she married a king, or learned the secrets of alchemy from one of her scholar suitors. My favourite is that she swore to take a thousand husbands and disappeared. Tell me, which do you prefer?'

Mr Moon swallowed. Mrs Peony watched the bob of his throat like a cat eyeing a

pitcher

of cream. She let go of his face.

‘A very fine balance of rivers and mountains,’ she declared. ‘A lucky face. You’ll do well with wealth, but even better in love. Tell me, is there a Mrs Moon?’

The answer was no. No would have sufficed. But for some reason, the words ‘Not yet,’ tumbled out of Mr Moon’s mouth. Mrs Peony smiled, patted his cheek, and went to collect her husband’s ashes. In a daze, Mr Moon followed her to the door.

‘Have, uh,’ he tried again. ‘Have a nice day, Mrs Peony.’

‘Yes dear, I imagine I will. See you again.’

She lumbered out of the room and Mr Moon swung the door shut. He very carefully resisted the urge to lock it.

* * *

Mrs Peony kept her husband beside her on the bus. Nobody stared, because nobody noticed. That was one of the blessings of being old; people tended to gloss over you. After all, there was nothing interesting about a little old lady. There were lots of them, each as interchangeable as the next.

London pattered by in its blacks and greys and daubs of colour. A young couple got on the bus, two girls barely sixteen by the looks of them. They held hands and giggled and generally tried to reduce the space between them to nothing. It made Mrs Peony smile, a smile she turned on the urn.

‘Hard to believe we were ever that sweet, though I dare say your hands wandered a mite bit more.’ She patted the urn affectionately. ‘Not that I minded.’

They came to her stop, and she shuffled down the aisle and out the door with an unacknowledged ‘Thank you.’ Once inside, she set her keys in the bowl by the door, hung her mac on its usual peg, and took her husband upstairs.

It was a small house, but she and Lee had made it theirs. Photos of their travels took up cabinet space with all the usual knick-knacks: Lee’s amateur pottery was everywhere, ranging from bug-eyed cats to wonky pots; and Mrs Peony’s prized paintings and woodcuts decorated the walls. A particular favourite hung outside the bathroom: a large nude woman involved with a giant squid. They’d picked the painting up in Hokkaido. If memory served correctly, it preceded a long, wonderful night spent (mostly) indoors.

Mrs Peony giggled at the thought.

At the entrance to the bedroom, she hooked a pole into the attic door and swung it open, revealing a folded wooden ladder that she carefully pulled out. The smell of dust and things left to sit in silence for many years drifted over her as she climbed, urn tucked under her arm, wary of slipping. Lee always insisted on holding the bottom of the ladder. He was a sop like that.

At the top, she slid Lee over the floor and crept to five large, wooden trunks. Some were ancient and beautifully carved, others were Ikea’s finest. All held something precious. Mrs Peony opened the nearest. Inside, were three urns.

‘Well Lee,’ she said. ‘It was a good life. One of my favourites, in fact. Sleep well, love.’

She set him beside Markel. They would have got on, she imagined. Even a century apart, they’d shared a similar sense of humour. She closed the lid.

That made seven hundred and eighty-two.

Mrs Peony rose. She descended the ladder. She hooked the attic door in place. Then she went to the mirror. It was easier to move now – bloody hips, always got her in the end –

and by the time she came to the vanity, she no longer needed the glasses perched on the end of her nose.

The face she'd worn for the past twenty years or so was gone, replaced by long, black hair and the plump white skin of a twenty-something girl with all her life ahead of her. She took off her old lady clothes and gave an appreciative whistle before slipping into a silk dressing gown.

She always liked this bit. The time in-between, when the world was heavy with possibility. Mr Moon had been nice, but he wasn't her only option. There was a world of people and choices. Maybe, she thought – mind slipping to the two girls on the bus – she'd give women another go. It'd been a few decades since Mei Lin. And there were all those toys now!

Yes, Peony decided. She wouldn't jump at the nearest target. She'd have a bit of a browse first.

Pleased, Peony made herself a hot cup of Ovaltine, settled herself on the couch, and tuned into the latest episode of *Coronation Street*. After a while, she opened Tinder, and proceeded to swipe right.

Here's You

Jenifer Nuttall

Here's you
wondrous as
you were the
day that your
mother first
conceived
of
you.

Two arms, two legs, two hands to
hold and touch and feel and know this
world, which has been waiting centuries to
know you. Eyes to see. A tongue to taste. Ears
to hear. But more than all your senses – a mind,
a brain. You are every electrical impulse that
is coursing through a root-work of
nerves. A rococo composition of bones
and muscles and ligaments and joints
and complex chemical compounds. Lungs
that know to breathe without you ever
having to tell them to. A beating heart that
propels your blood through an endless maze
of veins. You are tears and love and
pain. Plagued, not by humours or unseen
spirits, but by disease and disorder. So
loved that, long before your name was ever
spoken, we were looking for ways to keep those
demons away from you. Holding council with
the universe, asking it what makes you you
and how to make you stay. Finding galaxies
in the lens of a microscope, entire worlds
contained within cell samples.
You are flesh and sensation
and viscera and static
frustration and acid
and cellulite consciousness
capillaries and stardust
and substance and essence
hormones and matter
and vessels neurons
vitality and joy
observation tradition
both cosmos and bile
communication and song
and plasma and fat
mineral and fear
mucus and hope
curiosity and inspiration
rediscovery old invention.
You are the universe
expanding and folding
into a single moment –
a unified body.
Infinitely fascinating and completely human.

Trash Talk

Madeline Hoffman

My mother told me maybe if I ate less

bagels. Fifteen and blooming,
I didn't know the difference
between two inches until it took me ten years

to unlearn it. Months of uneating —
which I do not recommend —
are effective only in the way
that watching *Love is Blind* can feel
like falling in love, or *LaCroix*

can teach the taste of oranges.
I am haunted by the whisper-smell
of rising bread, a cheat

of pleasure, that wakes me from the nightmare-
dream of eating breakfast,
a rounded dough
the greatest threat to — what?

To imperceptibility. Walk down
our dorm's splintered stairs
to find a raccoon with my eyes
on the wooden counter, startled,
unearthed, a dirty spoon of Nutella
between my teeth, paws encrusted

with sugar and fat, angry
with the same sharp terror that might
make me delete my Netflix viewing history
but you say

let's have it on some bread,
and trash becomes good trash. We sit

across from each other, insisting
we do not really like store-bought
sweets, dipping our knives
into the jar, lifting absent bites

as we watch some true-love/hide-me show.

You're not supposed to see me
when the wanting overflows.
But we talk casually, jokingly,

and this is fine, this is normal,
this is trash TV,

and I am the can.

PLUTO.

Cherelle Findley

1

Po didn't spend a lot of time looking at herself. She didn't enjoy it. After many appointments, blood tests, and much nagging, her fondly named 'Girl Beard' was actually hirsutism. A few of the other things wrong with her, like her lack of periods, was due to her poorly functioning ovaries. In her most recent vlog, she spoke jubilantly about the relief of a diagnosis and the drama of laser hair removal. Nevertheless, as she moved her hand down to her face and picked at a few hairs that were growing on her chin, Po remembered that she couldn't stand the sight of herself.

She had come to terms with the idea that her body hated her a while ago. She couldn't help but feel that it was the Lord's way of punishing her for bullying fat girls in school. Over the last few months, Po had taken to thinking back on her school days and found she could recall them vividly.

This week she had been remembering her classmate Anita Simmons. Anita had been the poor soul that most people took the piss out of. Even now, Po didn't know why she was the chosen one. Fate had decided Anita was to suffer the most. She didn't think so at the time, but it was horrible how she would pinch her back rolls and cheeks until she bruised. When Anita cried her nose also dripped. Po cringed at the memory of what she said to her once.

'So, the fatty fuck also eats her snot?!'

Po thought about what she did to people like Anita. There was also Stephanie Walker. She would trip her up whenever she passed her in the halls. In class when nobody was looking she would snip the ends off her hair. She called Eoin Moore a paedo every time she saw him. There was also the time she decided Viktoria Dudková was a sket. It was a lie, but that didn't stop her from spreading rumours.

Po thought she wasn't nasty because she always stuck up for a girl that walked with a limp, and occasionally she called out homophobia. She was almost in her thirties now, and had come to terms with the fact she was only pretending to be a good person. It was easy to keep up the masquerade as she picked up her phone and scrolled down her socials, liking posts, and commenting with hearts and flames for her friends and fans. It took even less energy for her to repost a fundraiser someone had sent her. With her good deeds for the day done, Anita was still on her mind, and she began to wonder if she had any social media presence.

It started when her following began to grow. She would pick someone she had bullied in the past and obsess over how they'd changed. She'd try and find out if they went to university, were dating someone or – God forbid – had children. The smiling face of a slimmer Anita was enough to satiate the guilt that was bubbling. By the time she looked up from her screen, night had fallen. She had wasted the day. She should have planned or

recorded content, but everything she posted and spoke about revolved around a condition she'd much rather stopped existing. Po felt a gnawing in her stomach and a heaviness set in her shoulders as she let those thoughts consume her. Only writing could drag her back out.

She'd first started to feel what she thought as 'a little sad' towards the end of her school days. Back then, she'd listen to Mariah Carey deep cuts, Fleetwood Mac, or something erratic like *Babooshka* on repeat for a few hours. It was in the past year she had picked up the arguably healthier habit of journaling.

It was her ex-girlfriend's idea. She was a resentful but kind girl who put honey on everything she ate. Although it was the best relationship she had ever had, Po was not the type to let a good thing last. She became secretive and inconsistent, yet possessive enough to demand attention and affection whenever she wanted it.

After the breakup she gave Po a leather-bound journal. Po had left it to gather dust until last year when she decided to declutter and feng shui her bedroom for a vlog. The feng shui hadn't worked and a week later she admitted defeat and got a therapist. The journal stuck. It was a revelation. She recommended it to her friends and followers when they asked her how she managed to cope. It was a little bigger than her hand and inside were her lists.

good things

1. i'm not sponging off mum anymore
2. france got the world cup once again
3. my bulbasaur build-a-bear, sailor moon

what do I like about myself?

1. i have a big following so i'm as funny as i think i am
2. hit two milli subscribers
3. i look cute even with short hair ~~but i only cut it because my hair was fucking fall out but i digress~~

These lists were tragic, and enough to make her want to throw herself in front of moving traffic. It was the last list that grounded her.

pending good days/me bucket list

1. ~~witness the inevitable collapse of the western civilisation~~ slow burner
2. I WANT ANOTHER GYM CLASS HEROES ALBUM
3. see lindsey and the rest of fleetwood mac kiss and make-up
4. watch achilles/patroclus in a film where they're not cousins but boyfriends
5. ~~get an exercise bike and actually use it~~ i didn't use it – lol
6. have that girls holiday mum and i have been talking about
7. do an anthony bourdain inspired food tour
8. learn how to sail
9. ~~make a solid batch of brownies~~ solid is debatable tbh
10. go to carni in Barbados
11. go to burning man
12. write a self-help book

It was a shallow list that grew with every feeble attempt she made to 'better herself'. Although people knew about the journal, its contents were secret. She knew a potential Fleetwood Mac reunion was hardly a reason to live, but it was true to her.

Po brushed her fingers over the list thinking of something to add. No inspiration came

except perhaps a collaboration with an Afro haircare brand, but she couldn't bear to write something so serious. With hair on her mind, she swapped her journal for her phone and began to browse the socials of her favourite brand when a round of short, sharp knocks echoed through her house.

Most of Po's evenings were spent in solitude. If anyone did plan on 'dropping by' they would always call beforehand. Apart from the usual 'support my fundraiser' messages, there had been radio silence that evening. Po's skin tingled. Looking for something weapon-like, she settled on a stiletto as she peered through the window. Po tensed when she saw the familiar face.

It was Sasha.

Po hadn't seen Sasha in over two years, and they hadn't spoken in four. She had no recollection of telling her where she lived either. She had loved her once.

Po spoke first. 'Hi.'

'Hi.' Sasha responded after a second.

Then there was silence. Po had known Sasha since they were children, and not once had she heard her ask for help. When they left each other's lives, they were teenagers and now Sasha was something entirely different. The moonlight curved around the now sharp edges and full lips that defined her face. Muscles in her arm strained as she shifted the weight of a backpack which dangled by her side. Sasha had always stood proud. Now she hovered like a withering balloon.

'What are you doing here?' Po asked.

'I'm sorry. This is fucking stupid and I know I didn't text or call before coming over ... and I know we haven't talked in a while. I just didn't know where else to go.'



2

Taking a step forward, Po resisted the urge to hug her. It had been years since she had last touched Sasha and she had no idea what it would feel like anymore. So instead, she took a few steps back and let her in. The pair of them made their way into the kitchen which lit up as soon as they walked in. When she was having her kitchen done, she insisted on automatic lights. Not only would she never have to turn a light switch on, but it was also an excellent conversation starter for guests.

Sasha didn't make a comment about it. Instead, she looked at the kitchen space that resembled a show home. It was neat except for a thin layer of dust on the dining table.

'I didn't wake your mum up, did I?' Sasha asked.

Po shook her head and smiled. A lot of their relationship had consisted of Sasha sneaking over late at night. Most of the time they got away with it.

'Nah, don't worry about it. She moved back to France, got married again. She lives just outside Strasbourg.'

Sasha frowned, 'So this is your house?'

'Yeah,' Po replied, pausing for a moment. She wondered if it was worth telling her the whole story, 'You probably know that my dad died, not long after we ...' The words filled the space in her mouth, but she couldn't say them. She decided at that moment it would be better if neither of them acknowledged their past.

'He left me this house, it was a bit of a shithole. You know, one of his failed landlord ventures after the band broke up, but it looks pretty good now.' She turned her back to Sasha and busied herself with the kettle.

'I heard ... about your dad. I was gonna call you, but I didn't think you'd want to hear from me.' Sasha said.

Po had prided herself on being a mystery to everyone but it wasn't possible with Sasha. She was right, she would have told her to fuck off.

'No, it's okay. You're right I didn't want to hear from you. I would have said something I'd regret.' Po wasn't close to her dad, but his death, and the sourness of a recent break up – it would have been too much. Even now, thinking of her father in the past tense caused a lump to rise in her throat.

'Still, I'm sorry.' Sasha's expression was solemn as she spoke. Po offered her a smile.

'Don't be. This was the best thing he had ever done for me.'

A silence descended on the pair. Po didn't want to specify whether she was talking about his death or the house, and despite the perplexed look on Sasha's face, she didn't ask.

'It's a nice house, most people don't leave their kids a house when they die. Even a failed landlord venture,' Sasha quipped, and warmth spread from Po's neck to her face. They had often argued about money and Po's blasé attitude to her family's substantial wealth. It seemed as though they were falling back into old habits already.

Sasha didn't have to try to elicit a variety of reactions from Po whether it be anger, lust, or in this case – embarrassment. Po knew it was her fault for bringing it up, and now shame was rolling through her body. It was short lived. She noticed that Sasha had stopped paying attention to her to look at her fridge.

'Don't go silent on me now, Sash.'

Po felt her skin begin to tingle when Sasha's gaze joined hers.

'I'm not judging you, if that's what you're wondering. Your dad wasn't around. Your feelings are complicated.' Sasha paused to think and Po waited. 'It doesn't matter what I

think.’ Sasha settled on and Po nodded in agreement.

A comfortable silence descended upon them as Po busied herself with making drinks. ‘You still like green tea? With honey?’

‘Yeah.’

Po placed the mug in front of Sasha before leaning back again, picking at the fabric of her cardigan. ‘So, what’s going on?’ She asked as casually as she could. She had no nice way of saying ‘*Sasha, why the fuck are you at my house?*’.

‘It’s um ... well it’s a lot of shit.’ Sasha responded after slowly sipping from her mug.

‘Loads of people have lots of shit. And I’m not saying I’m an expert, but I’d guess most of them don’t turn up at their ex’s house because of it. So, you’re going to have to do better than that.’ Placing her mug down, Po frowned as she remembered something, ‘Aren’t you dating someone?’

Sasha’s eyebrows raised in surprise and Po realised she’d made a mistake. ‘Um, no. We broke up. How did you know I was dating someone?’ She asked, a smile beginning to creep up for the first time since she arrived.

‘How did you know where I lived?’ Po responded and Sasha laughed. ‘Anyway, I’m sorry to hear about that. Still, why are you *here*?’

‘I don’t know. I just ...’ Sasha fell silent again before shrugging.

Po covered her mouth as she laughed, ‘Is this a joke?’ Po started to pace before focusing her attention back to Sasha, who evaded her gaze. Was it a joke? Had her friends set up this nightmarish scenario and hidden cameras somewhere? ‘Come on ... you have to understand where I’m coming from. *Please* can you tell me why you came here in the middle of the night?’

Sasha didn’t speak. Instead, she pulled at the sleeves of her jumper as she took great interest in Po’s half-dead yucca. Her mouth opened and closed several times with nothing, but a few garbled noises and sighs left her mouth. Looking down at the time, 23:56, Po grumbled.

‘Sasha, listen to me. You’re starting to annoy me so please tell me why you’re here. It’s not a hard question.’

* * *

There were heavy bags under Sasha’s eyes, her clothes were scruffy and had obviously been worn several times. Po had tried not to focus on her physical details, but everything about her seemed heavy. The woman in front of her was miserable, and Po knew if she had turned to her of all people for help it must be bad.

‘I have nowhere else to go. It was either here, or my car.’ Sasha admitted. ‘Can I stay here tonight? Just crash on the sofa or something. Please.’ She lowered her head again.

‘What about your parents?’ Po asked, her voice softening.

‘I can’t go there. I can’t talk to them about ... this.’

Po clasped her hands together and nodded. It was clear that Sasha needed sleep and peace and bizarrely she had sought it in her home. Po wondered if the strange circumstances she often found herself in could be television worthy. She contemplated the elevator pitch as she locked her front door and gestured to Sasha to follow her upstairs.

‘I’ve got a spare room. Get in the shower and sort yourself out. You got everything you need in that bag?’ Po looked at Sasha again. Aside from her messy clothes and general haggard appearance, her dreads were in dire need of retwisting and her face was greasy too. She nodded.

The hallway was dark, brightened by the glinting of several framed golden and platinum records and pictures of Po’s dad on various stages as they moved upstairs. Soon they reached a modest room with a double bed and en-suite.

‘I’ve got a fridge full of shit so if you feel like treating me in the morning with a gourmet breakfast, by all means go ahead.’ Walking further into the room, Po ran a finger across the dusty bedside table. Po had decorated the room to her own tastes, which was evident from the 100,000 subscribers award, a signed GIMS poster and French hip-hop memorabilia from the 80s.

Sasha placed her bag on a plush emerald chair in the corner which was sandwiched between a vintage-looking oak bookcase and a Daft Punk poster. Po thought the unfamiliarity of the space might be comforting for Sasha. She didn’t seem so heavy anymore. Whatever Sasha was running from didn’t enter the walls of Po’s home.

‘There’s some more toiletries in the bathroom.’ Po said as she made her way out of the bedroom and back into the hallway. Sasha looked around the room but didn’t say anything until she sat on the bed.

‘This is lovely.’ Sasha looked up at Po, her eyes softened as she smiled, ‘I didn’t think you’d let me in. I’m glad you did. Thank you.’

Po didn’t say anything else – except a mumbled ‘Goodnight’ – before going into her room. As soon as they broke eye contact this time, Po felt a small prickling inside her chest.

Half Awake

Thomas Martin

Hailey stepped out of the en suite, moving a white towel through her hair. With the door slightly ajar, I watched a fine cloud of steam rush up toward the ceiling and then drop, disappearing into the clunky old fan – the one tucked in the corner of our room, squeaking with each pained rotation. It used to hum all through the night, rattling in its plastic cage. I would have loved to pull the plug, but Hailey couldn't do without it.

Her skin was peeling, flaky and gold, like the edges of an old pirate map. She was wearing one of my t-shirts, which was still a little damp from the hours we'd spent by the lake. Her nails were painted blue, but in the room's half-light, they could have passed for black.

After applying a thin layer of her night cream, she perched herself on the edge of the bed and lay her head down on my chest. I liked that. I liked the way we would lose ourselves in pseudo-sleep. Whenever I picture Hailey, I see those closing moments before we drifted off to sleep.

'You were quiet at dinner,' she said.

I shrugged and said I hadn't noticed.

'Well, you were,' she said, yawning a little.

'It's nothing, just Sean getting on my nerves.'

She was waiting for something more significant, and I'd found it was somehow easier to lie with partial truths.

'I keep thinking about results day.'

She put her arm around me and ruffled my hair in a way that told me not to worry. Hailey had this gift, it allowed her to overlook the disparities in our two futures, about university and what followed. She truly believed that efforts would be made, trains would be caught, and nothing whatsoever could separate the two of us.

I looked down.

Her eyes were brown, much darker than mine. Her hair, having been bleached that same summer, looked like the pale wheat that grew all around the villa. She asked if we could cuddle for a while, before we fell asleep. I said we could and Hailey coiled herself around me, knowing exactly where my limbs would fall.

Then she planted her hand on my waist, gently.

And I told her that I needed to use the bathroom.

'Don't be long,' she said, reaching for her floral wash bag.

I'd heard that before. It was a kind of signpost. A green light. She was nudging me, letting me know, preparing me because she was herself prepared. I'd learnt to read those signals. But there were other cues that weren't so straightforward.

Hailey had a habit of leaving the door unlocked whenever she was in the bathroom.

'Well, I don't have anything to hide,' she'd say, as if somebody had asked to search inside her bag. I didn't really know what to make of it at the time.

I went into the bathroom and took my phone out.

I didn't always do it, but that time I did. In fact, I might have done it much more than I care to admit. But it helped. I'd browse the web for that image, that one perfect video, hoping that none of what I was searching for was somehow punched out into a receipt and read aloud by men tutting in their white lab coats.

When I was ready, I crawled back into bed.

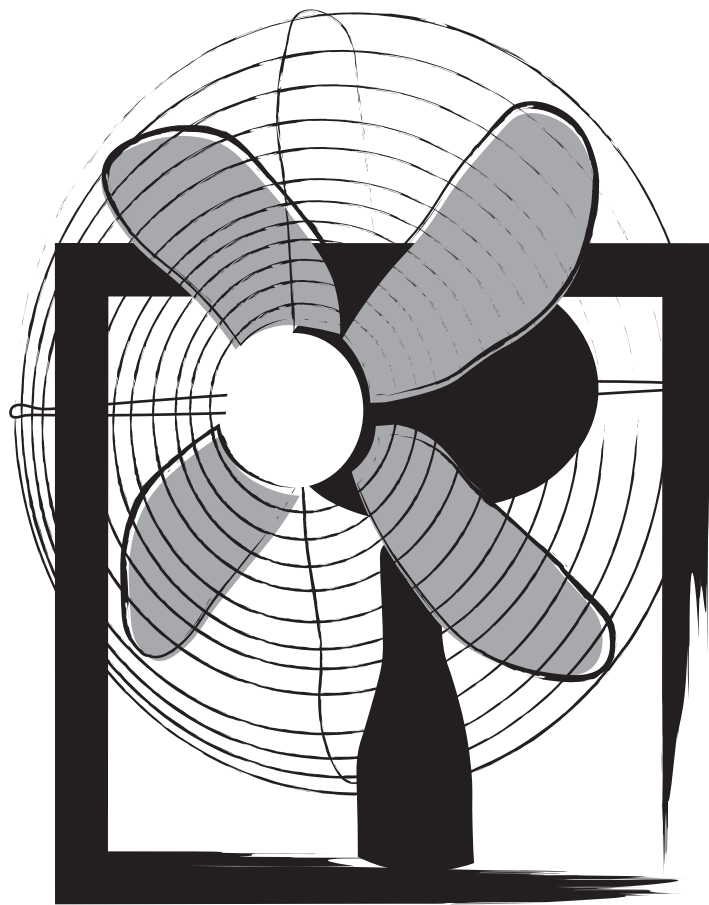
'Is this okay?' she asked, no more than a murmur.

I nodded my head and told myself that it was okay.

Then her hands were in my hair, going wherever they pleased. Things progressed as you might expect, and all of it washed in white moonlight.

I remember she told me I smelled of sandalwood, before slipping her hand into my shorts. I folded myself away then, and kept folding, again and again, as if I were a paper plane. When we had finished, we broke apart and Hailey fell asleep.

But I stayed awake, listening to that fan.



The local *supermarché* was just a short bike ride away. That next morning, I fetched one of the rental bikes and pedalled down the grassy slopes beyond the villa. Between the woollen beech trees, a warm light broke across the gravel, and onto me. I closed my eyes and felt almost at peace.

If you had asked me about that night, I'd have told you I wasn't fazed. I'd participated knowing what I would be expected to do – what I'd be expected to perform. There had been time to call things off, to feign any kind of excuse, only I never did. There was never really any question of stopping.

It just happened.

What really ate away at me was how I lay there afterwards and couldn't bear the thought that somebody had overheard us. Sean, Lyla, my mother. I could already hear the silence surrounding it, as if everybody were in on some private joke, grading my nightly performance around the breakfast table.

Yes, it dragged on a bit, didn't it?

She was clearly not impressed.

A lot of stopping and starting

I thought he'd call it quits.

All of this flew through my head, purring like the blades of that fan. In some strange way, I could see myself the way *she* must have seen me. Red-faced, eyes screwed shut in mimicked bliss, receding from view like a shadow in the dark.

I cycled harder, and the landscape soon began to change once I crossed the river. The olive groves and peach farms gave way to greying industrial yards, all wreathed in chain-link, chiming quietly in the breeze. Beyond the gates lay a wasteland filled with mildewed plastic, mounds of rotten cardboard, and loading bays ridden with lichen from their want of use. There were rubbish bins too, charred, no doubt, by the local kids who had nothing better to do with their summer.

I carried on, already shallow-breathed and spotted with little beads of sweat.

Thankfully, the *supermarché* was equipped with several air-conditioning units and at least a dozen chrome fans whirring gently in every corner of the shop. The aisles were empty, except for the wizened old crones who spent their day talking to the *boucher*, pointing at meat that they could scarcely bite into. I shuffled down the aisles, graced with intermittent bursts of air.

I don't know what I was looking for.

It felt therapeutic, to wander around aimlessly. Then before I knew it, I was staring at a magazine. What drew my focus wasn't the women or even necessarily the men, it was the space between them – and that look in their eyes. There was something implicit in that look, an understanding, a rhythm.

It sparked a strange sensation inside of me. My chest grew tight, and I could feel my throat closing, as though it were being sewn shut. My vision blurred and I was stumbling from aisle to aisle, trying to find my breath.

I must have known it, right then and there, that none of what I was feeling was normal. But I tried to suppress those feelings because, well, I suppose it was just easier.

In the end, I returned with the cherries, plums, and fresh bread, as per my mother's request. Nothing was said or otherwise implied about last night and we all sat around the breakfast table, eating pastries and drinking fresh orange juice.

* * *

The next day we went into Cahors.

My stepfather, Sean, worked for a big architectural firm and so he spent most of his time pointing out all the 'gothic influences', snapping photos here and there, and pausing for thought in that abrupt way of his.

I had to admit, the place did have a macabre feeling.

There was a square at the centre of town, with this great rectangular fountain stretched out across the marble flagstones. The basin was lined with a deposit of acacia leaves that had started to bake in the midday heat.

Across the square, a couple of steps before the adjoining market, I spotted a boy. Hailey and Lyla had spotted him too. He was sitting at the base of an old memorial wall,

watching us. He wore baggy, black clothes and his right arm was wrapped in plaster cast.

He was a little daunting, I thought. It was in the way he carried himself.

‘Why is he staring at you?’ Lyla asked Hailey, sniggering a little.

Hailey shrugged her shoulders and rifled through her tote bag for the instant camera she’d made sure to pack. She wanted to have something you could hold in your hand, a testament to our year together.

I could feel the heat on the back of my neck as my mother wandered over, opening up our communal supply of sun cream, as I stole another look at the boy. I wasn’t sure he’d been staring at Hailey. The next second, he got up, spruced his black hair, and headed down one of the backstreets.

I stifled a groan as my mother smeared sun cream onto the back of my neck. That’s when Hailey said we should get a picture and I said okay. But as we moved into position, I didn’t know if I wanted this moment immortalised, tacked into photo albums and uploaded for all of time. Regardless, Hailey took several pictures and stood scrutinising the results. But I was still transfixed by the boy.

We carried on across the square, squinting through the heat.

‘Try smiling next time,’ Hailey said with a suppressed sort of laugh.

‘He’s clinically unable,’ said Lyla.

My mother rubbed my shoulders, perhaps thinking she could generate such a smile and solve all of my problems for me. But it wouldn’t come. Hailey put her arm around my waist, and we pressed on in the heat, her camera at the ready.

‘Don’t worry,’ Sean said. ‘He’s never been a fan of smiling.’

* * *

That night my mother made *coq au vin* and afterwards we both sat beneath the pergola, tearing up pieces of baguette to soak up the leftover sauce. She started to talk about Hailey, how she got on so well with Lyla and how she and Sean could be left alone to their jokes, which were often at my expense.

Then we were in the kitchen, washing our dishes in the sink.

Hailey was upstairs, calling her mother. Lyla had sealed herself in her room, and Sean had taken a ‘very important phone call’, as my mother threw him a severe look.

Then she turned, beaming at me.

‘I think Hailey’s enjoying herself.’

I agreed, rocking my head slightly.

‘Aren’t you glad you asked her along?’

‘Yes,’ I said, as a sort of reflex, ‘of course I am.’

She continued in this manner for as long as there were dishes to dry. It was as though Hailey had passed all the right tests and, having exceeded my mother’s expectations, was now entitled to more permanent membership.

I wasn’t sure how I felt.

I still loved her, I think. But things had been so different in the beginning. They were malleable then. We possessed this nominal force over one another, like a weak magnet. We would fight of course, sometimes for days, but I just told myself that we were still fine-tuning, tweaking those imperfect parts of ourselves until everything fell into its proper place. And maybe it had, because we didn’t fight anymore.

What is there to write about except teenage longing?

By Francesca Weekes

On the Astro Turf at secondary school
skinning my knee
and Tess sitting with me
strawberry blonde hair
in a high ponytail

or maybe it was another time we didn't get
to play football
Meant to be laying out cones
for the Year Sevens' football –

Listening to her talk about her boyfriend's semen
which sometimes tasted of strawberries
Emptying the black plastic bits out of my trainers
again when I got home

I can't say I've ever thought of strawberries like that
but I wanted to look like Tess
the kind of girl who did

I liked her body in the little tank tops she wore
Surely my legs were longer than hers, surely
everybody else's body was just fine
and mine was wrong
Bits of school sticking to the graze on my knee

I guess all formative moments happened
at parties but did not belong
to me. My first kiss with a friend who'd
already had hers, so it wasn't special

Lying back on wet grass that marked
my elbows. Very British to binge-drink,
no cathartic plunge
in an outdoor pool at someone's rich
aunt's house
looking ethereal

Never thought I'd get a tattoo
But the smiley face on my knee

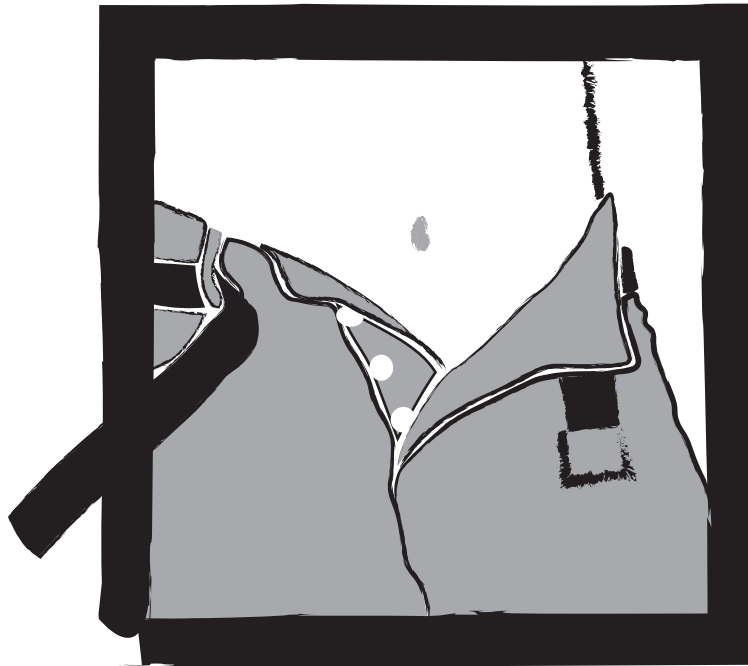
visible now when I wear shorts

Strong legs that don't play
football anymore, I'm running
to meet my friends, I'm learning kickflips

Bleaching the grass stains out
of jeans I didn't like at fifteen

Unbuttoned

Tom Guy



Getting an erection in public is, at best, impractical. Being eleven years old, on a school trip, in the theatre watching *Cinderella* and getting an erection is, frankly, mortifying. Especially when the only person on stage is Buttons.

I was in year six, and therefore not completely ignorant of anatomy and sex. In the classroom, PSHE lessons had taught me that when a man has sex with a woman, his penis gets hard. In the changing rooms at Swimming Club, teenagers had taught me – between horrifying displays of pubic hair – that a blowjob was when a woman put a man’s penis in her mouth (whether it was hard or not, and for what purpose, I didn’t know). OK, so I had the basics.

Why the fudge did I have an erection looking at Buttons, then?

I put it down to the excitement of the panto. Like the other boys in my class, I had sat cross-armed and sullen on the bus: *Spider-Man 3*¹ was out on release at the cinema and when the teachers promised a trip to the theatre, we had convinced ourselves we were seeing Toby Maguire in action. *Cinderella* at the Birmingham Hippodrome, then, was a grave disappointment. I listened to My Chemical Romance on my Sony Ericsson and looked out of the window for most of the journey. However, twenty minutes and a bottle of Coca Cola into the performance, I was booing and hissing at the wicked stepsisters as if Alex Ferguson and Gary Neville had walked onstage. It was fun, and being able to shout as loud as you wanted with your teachers present was not a novelty lost on me.

¹ My dad took me to see *Spider-Man 3* later in the month, and we both agreed it was the worst of the trilogy. As far as I remember, I remained flaccid throughout.

And then Buttons walked, nay, floated, onto stage – splendid in his blue jacket, rosy cheeks and golden buttons glowing in the spotlight.

‘Hello!’ he cried, waving his white-gloved hand.

‘Hello!’ I roared back, slightly louder than everyone else around me.

I had a sudden urge to tell everybody around me that he was my cousin, my friend, that I knew this man, this genius. He began a monologue about Cinderella and – what the hell was this? – my penis felt strange. I looked around frantically, terrified somebody would notice the miniscule lump in my jeans.

I told a teaching assistant I needed the toilet and waddled up the steps to the bathroom, looking as though I’d had an accident. I went into a cubicle, locked the door, and yanked my trousers and pants to my ankles. Nothing unusual. The erection had gone. Hang on was that a – no, piece of fluff, no pubic hair. I peed, eyeing my penis as though it were a small but dangerous beast, not to be trusted. I gave the little rascal a stern look before zipping up; I wasn’t sure what it was up to, but I didn’t like it.

I returned to my seat and tried to be calmer. It was the Coke and the shouting that had made me feel funny, I told myself. However, every time Buttons appeared, my heart would beat harder, and my stomach would churn and fizz.

On the bus home, I sat next to Maisie (she’s a barrister now). Riding on the romance of Cinderella, she took hold of my hand.

‘I fancy you,’ she said.

‘Why?’

‘You’re tall. And you’re the best at football.’

‘And cricket. And tennis,’ I pointed out.

‘Yeah. Do you fancy me?’

‘Yes,’ I said. And I did.

She planted a kiss on my cheek.² I was surprised and flattered, and oh sweet Jesus, I had another erection.

I did not know the word *bisexual* then. I still don’t fully understand it now.

* * *

I forgot about Buttons pretty quickly, and when Luke told me Miss Breakwell (sorry, Miss Breakwell) gave him a ‘stiffy’, I felt better about those too. Maisie dumped me – it so happened that at high school there were boys even taller than me and even better at football (she got engaged to one of them in New York last year). Not at cricket, mind, but that sport was never a babe magnet in Bewdley, rural Worcestershire, where I grew up.

Puberty happened to me quickly and generously; I grew tall and handsome, shed my layer of puppy fat and had wisps of black hair on my chin. I was confident and charming (cocky and crass) and had a string of girlfriends, whom I snogged on the playground and in the park.

At Ben’s thirteenth birthday party,³ me and the birthday boy dry-humped in a bathtub, but we put this down to too much Red Bull and Haribo and rejoined the party. I did not ask him whether he’d had a stiffy too, but perhaps I simply did not want to acknowledge my own. I held hands with the girl I sat next to in French for the rest of the party, clinging on

² The journey home from *Cinderella* started a relationship which carried on all the way into high school. We had our first kiss-on-the-lips on the sweaty dance floor at the end-of-school disco. Her mouth tasted like Marmite.

³ Ben lost one of his bottom teeth in a skateboard accident when he was fourteen. They’re not fixed to this day. He is now a horrible racist and perhaps the worst person I know.

to my straightness.

I fell, naturally, into the popular, sporty crowd at school. The group was full of good-looking boys oozing new testosterone. Changing rooms were an almost comically homoerotic place, where boys flaunted and compared their developing bodies. To my relief, with Buttons and the bathtub lurking in the murky waters of my memory, I felt no attraction to any of my peers. *If you were gay*, I told myself, *you'd have liked looking at Kyle's huge dong*.

For my fifteenth birthday, I got an iPhone 3GS. It was my first private access to the internet. That night, I crawled under the covers of my bed, my face illuminated by my Google search: *Robert Pattinson naked*.

I surprised myself with the search. I had been sat in my desk chair, disappointed with the results from *Holly Willoughby boobs*. I don't recall why I got under the duvet or why my search included Robert Pattinson (probably because I was Team Edward – all the signs were there), but my search took me to the website Tumblr, which led me to thousands of naked males. Under the covers, Freddy571 was born. I emerged perhaps two hours later, sweaty and thrilled.

My life didn't change. I enjoyed clumsy (and sometimes painful) foreplay with my girlfriend. At weekends, I played sport, read books, and went to parties. I was living the life of a happy, straight teenager. However, each weeknight, I would crawl under the covers with my iPhone 3GS, and as Freddy571, enter my undercover, gay world. I had split myself in two. When I was with a girl, or playing tennis, I was Tom. At night, under the covers, I was Freddy. The two did not mix. I still was not attracted to any of my friends. I still fancied girls. Life was good. And then I met Dan.

I was seventeen. Every day after school, I would walk around town, over fields, through streams and parks with my neighbour, Jake, and his fat black Labrador, Butch. One day, Jake said that his friend from football was coming. He went to a different school and was a year younger but lived near us. He was called Dan.

Dan lived in the Beverly Hills of Bewdley: a row of colossal, individually designed houses that gazed imperiously over the town below. Jake went up the driveway to ring the doorbell and I waited with Butch, trying to stop him from peeing all over the flowerbeds.

Jake returned with Dan. He was a small, skinny boy, with messy sandy hair, feline eyes and a shy disposition. There was nothing remarkable about him, but as soon as I saw him, a dizzying wave of feeling passed over me. I fancied him. I really fucking fancied him. I felt ashamed and excited; my heart was beating rapidly and I was extremely hot. I knew at that moment my life would not be the same.

'Hi Dan.'

'Hi.'

We began to walk. Dan and Jake spoke about their match at the weekend. I walked behind, holding Butch's lead limply. Something strange was happening to me. My insides churned and rocked and I felt dizzy. All the feelings I had trapped with Freddy underneath the covers were smashing into me, knocking me off-balance. I sat down on a grassy verge and had my first ever panic attack. My whole body vibrated and I gulped air in desperate heaves. I was crying uncontrollably.

When I had calmed, we did as teenage boys do: we pretended nothing had happened. I mumbled something about my nan being unwell and we carried on walking. We walked to the grounds of an abandoned manor house, peering in the broken windows, looking for evidence of the notorious ghosts that lived inside. The sun began to set, so we climbed up the tiered walled garden, past the overgrown tennis court and the decaying statues of Roman women, to a soft wooden bench that overlooked the grounds and house. We were drenched in an orange glow. The air was perfumed with dead roses.

‘You all right, Tom?’ Jake asked.

‘Yeah,’ I said.

Dan gave me a quick, gentle slap on the back. His touch was an electric pulse through my body.

When I got home, I received a text:

Hey Tom, its Dan. U ok? Here if u wanna talk.

Hi Dan, yh im ok thnks, just going thru a hard time rn.

And so my hard time began. It sounds strange to say now, but until I met Dan, I had not considered the possibility I could be gay. What happened under the covers had always been like a game: a game I watched a familiar stranger playing. Now though, I was infatuated with a boy, a real boy. Bisexuality was, to me, an alien concept: I had never met a bisexual boy, never seen one on television, read about one in a book. In short, they did not exist. I was left with a new reality: I was *gay*.

As night fell, I cried silently, violently into my pillow. I thought about all the things I would have to give up: football, girls, **boobs**. I loved boobs. I loved girls. I loved sex. Nothing was fair and nothing made sense.

The next morning, when I woke, there was a heavy weight on my chest and a turbulence in my stomach. As I got ready for sixth form, I received a text from Dan.

Fancy a walk tonight?

I ran to the bathroom and vomited.

Sounds good.

People began to notice a difference in me. I was quiet, withdrawn, always checking my phone (Dan and I texted constantly). My dad gave me *The Catcher in the Rye* thinking I was going through my cool, angsty phase. I made excuses not to see my girlfriend in the common room and at weekends. She got frustrated and dumped me. I was glad. I lived with a perpetual feeling of dread and sadness. I couldn’t concentrate in lessons. I had been earmarked as the yearly Oxbridge candidate for our small sixth form, but my high grades at AS level were backed up with an absence from mock exams and a piece of History coursework which was, ‘embarrassingly lazy’. I started smoking weed during the day, grateful for the numbness it brought.

My last ever parents’ evening arrived. Mum was already emotional: her time as mother to schoolchildren was ending (my older brother was already at university). I was anxious, but that was nothing new. We sat in front of Mr Bennett, my Film Studies teacher. He was a wiry, bald man with an impossibly small head and exuberant, generous energy bursting from his tiny frame. The day after Cameron’s victory over Miliband, he suspended teaching and raided the drama closet for an impromptu improv session to lift our spirits.

‘Something terrible is happening to your son,’ he told Mum. I felt her flinch next to me. Neither of them would look at me. My parents had both noticed I’d been ‘flat’, but I had been fairly good at concealing my turmoil. ‘He’s lost his spark, his enthusiasm, his personality. I saw him the other day sat on the playground, on his own, looking like a tramp. The year sevens were laughing at him. His essays have deteriorated completely. Tom, we’re very worried about you.’

He looked at me for the first time. I erupted in tears. Teachers, parents and students began to look over at us. I ran from the hall, my trainers squealing on the solid oak floor. I slumped on a bench and had a ferocious panic attack. Through shuddering sobs, I agreed to see a doctor.

During the misery, there were moments of light. My relationship with Dan had begun to blossom. We flew his drone (they had all the cool stuff on Beverly Hills), stole fireworks from his garage and let them off in the woods. We would often walk for miles in a straight

line, through gardens, farms, woodland, lanes, whatever came before us, before stopping to light fires from bits of newspaper and twigs. We'd listen to our favourite music⁴ and speak about the future.

'We could go travelling. And film all of it. Make a documentary or something. Then we could start a clothing line.' Dan had lots of ideas, none of them lasting for more than about three days, but that's how it was between us: there was a feeling that, when we were together, anything was possible.

'I honestly feel like you're my big brother,' he said to me one day. What a wonderful, awful thing to hear from the boy you are in love with.

Our friendship quickly became tactile – it felt natural for us to hug often. The scent of his aftershave and his warm, soft skin was intoxicating. But despite my aching desire, there was never any sexual tension between us. When I was with him, I felt peaceful, happy, hopeful even. Unless he was on his phone. Then I became jealous and resentful, imagining the girls he was texting, the other friends he was planning to meet, the ways he was plotting to ditch me. These sudden flashes of feeling reminded me of the misery that was awaiting me when we parted.

I didn't go to the doctors. Not yet. What was I going to say? *Hi doc, I want to fuck my mate and that makes me sad and confused?* Instead, I generally tried to pull myself together. I turned my phone off during school hours, stopped smoking weed, and did my best to pay attention in class. I felt no less wretched internally, but externally, at least, I had the appearance of a normal teenager again. I did some half-hearted revision for my A level exams and accepted an unconditional offer to study Marketing at Sheffield Hallam. I had wanted to study English Literature at Cambridge, but things hadn't quite gone to plan. I sat my exams, ill-prepared but confident in my blagging ability.

Shortly after, I passed my driving test⁵ and Dan and I set off for the Jurassic Coast in my dad's Ford Fiesta. We walked along the grassy coastal path from Ringstead to Lulworth, occasionally skidding down rocky paths to secluded coves and hidden caves. The air was warm and clean. It was impossible not to feel serene sat amongst the colourful wildflowers, watching the waves lap steadily and insistently on the pale shingle below.

On our last night of the trip, we were staying at a campsite above Durdle Door. We got Dan's inflatable kayaks (seriously, they had *all* the cool stuff) from the boot and headed down to the beach. We pushed out onto the water and rowed through the stone arch, chasing the reddening sun that was sinking behind the line of the horizon. As families filed up the steps like ants to the nest, we rowed back to shore and sunk our toes into the fine sand. Dusk brought melancholy. I was leaving for Sheffield the following week.

'I'll come up like twice a month, at least,' Dan said.

'Yeah, and I'll probably come back every few weeks,' I said.

Dan told me about Lily from his college, and the naked pictures they'd been exchanging on Snapchat. My eyes burned with shameful envy. I told him the story of how I lost my virginity.⁶ A few eager stars, and then darkness and cold air arrived at Durdle Door, but neither of us wanted to move.

'It's crazy, we've only known each other a year, but we're closer than I've ever been to anyone. I feel like we've been best mates all our life,' Dan said.

I kissed him.

⁴ More accurately, we listened to Dan's favourite music. I pretended to like The 1975 for an entire year. He would not make the same concession for Simon & Garfunkel and Miles Davis.

⁵ First time. No minors. Wham, bam, thank you Pam.

⁶ Under a trampoline, at a party, in year 10. The same girl, who we shall call Barbara, also gave me my first ever hand job under the table in Biology, fittingly, around a year before then.

He stood slowly, grabbed his kayak and began to pull it along the sand, away from me. I sat motionless, desolate, until the cold dark waves of the Channel began to lap around my ankles.

Notes

By Jenifer Nuttall

It's 5am at my desk and there is a distinct lack of noise. I've been ticking my pen against the veneer in an effort to convince my ears that they still function, but now they are off, down from my head, in search of sound.

A cat is snoring in an armchair, somewhere between the roll of a purr and the pause of an unclothed foot on gravel – crit – crit – not enough to chase away the electrical hum of wires in walls or idealess minds.

We are still two hours from time. I boil the kettle in an imitation of breakfast, imagining the unconduted orchestra of voices that never quite shape the notes of words like “cereal,” “coffee” or “looks cold today.”

Somewhere beyond this room, there is a waking, a shush of bus waves blowing across dew-damp roads, lampposts yawning light onto empty pavements, promising the orange of a sunrise that may yet make it through the clouds.

The Secret of Good Work

Helen Mayall

1

Moor Mill, Bolton
18 February 1908

I kept my head down all morning, watching the pirns whirl like ballerinas on the winding frame, dressing themselves with cotton until they were full and bloated, ready to be replaced. As the wheels turned near my feet, my mind wandered back to the Chadwick Museum, where I'd been on Saturday afternoon, and the mummified foot displayed in a glass box with its apricot-tinged nails and brown wrinkled skin hanging off the emaciated bones.

It reminded me of *Frankenstein*. I was trying to decide whether I should borrow the book again from the library when the bell rang and the frames stopped. I was hungry, but before I could eat the butty I'd brought from home – just a dry piece of mangled loaf spread thinly with treacle – I followed a few of the other women towards the lavatory.

Mary, my neighbour, had been the first to rush off down the corridor, but soon came running back.

'I can't believe it,' Mary panted, crouching over as she spoke. 'The privy's overflowing and there're cockroaches everywhere again.' Her face had a bilious look to it.

There was a sharp intake of breath as everyone heard what she said. Anne, the matriarch and unofficial spokesperson of the group, hurried over.

'Let's see,' said Anne, going over to look. She came straight back out of the cubicle with her fingers over her nose.

I could smell the earthy, mud-like scent of decay from where I stood at the entrance to the workroom. This had started to become a regular occurrence since they replaced our outside privy with an inside water closet. We would all have to traipse upstairs to use the one on the next floor, which was difficult when our breaks were so short.

Anne nodded her head towards the other side of the room, indicating we should move further away from the manager's office. We walked down the central aisle, past all the winding frames, stepping over the women already sat on the floor to eat their food.

There were thirty of us in this department, but half the women had gone home for lunch. I would have liked to have gone too, but it was too far and I would only have to help Mother with the laundry anyway.

I looked down at my hands. The soft skin between my fingers was red and beginning to peel. I rubbed it, looking for some relief.

'I think we should go and speak to Mr Armstrong,' said Anne, once we reached the far

wall, her eyes looking to the rest of us for support. Anne had worked here the longest and although she was outspoken, her kind manner meant we listened to her. Her children were grown and had young families of their own, so she looked after us instead.

‘Yes, we should,’ said Mary, nodding her head while stepping from one foot to the other. She was obviously desperate to go and relieve herself, but I knew she wouldn’t want to miss an opportunity to support Anne. Mary was young and lived at home, like I did, but had recently started socialising with some of the group in the evenings at the theatre in town or, occasionally, the pub. I knew she wanted to be well-liked. We never had the money for me to go too. Not that I would ever step foot in a pub.

‘I say we take some inspiration from those at Sunnyside Mill,’ Anne continued. ‘They stopped letting things slide and so should we. I’m sick of these lot breathing down our necks. Expecting too much from too little. Everyone knows these threads are second-rate, but they want a king’s ransom for it. I bet the men wouldn’t stand for it, I tell you that.’

‘You’re right,’ said Connie. She was a little older than us, catty and often attention-seeking. I took care to avoid her as much as possible. ‘We’ll go and knock on his door at the end of the day and tell him what’s what. Who else is coming?’

‘I’ll come,’ said Mary.

Everyone else just looked at each other or turned away. Many had disappeared upstairs or gone to eat their lunch in a quiet corner.

I knew we should be treated better. We deserved a functioning lavatory and there was never any clean water to wash our hands with, never mind drink. I was always gasping when I got home, but I couldn’t get involved. I needed this position. Mother relied on it.

Anne, never wanting there to be a pause in the conversation, carried on. ‘I’m near finishing. What’s he going to do? He won’t find anyone with rates as good as mine.’ She smiled, and we all knew it was true. She produced more pirns than any of us.

We dispersed when Jim, the overseer, walked past the door.

Mary and I rushed upstairs and back again before thrusting our butties down our throats just before the bell rang and the frames started up again.

* * *

The preparation department was in the basement of Moor Mill. It had a dingy feel to it even in the daytime because the light had to traipse its way through a maze of terraced houses as well as compete with the umbrella of smog that clung to the town before it reached us.

The room was cramped with machinery and bodies. Row upon row of winding frames filled the space, each the size of a small horse and cart with two of us to each machine.

Mary and I worked together. Large spinning wheels at the bottom of the frame wound the weft yarn upwards through the back and onto the pirns. We teased the thread from the machine onto its wooden ridged centre, hoping it would catch the first time. We put the full pirns in a basket on top of the frame, ready to be sent to the weaving shed where they would be fitted into shuttles for the loom. Clumps of cotton dust danced in the air like snowflakes as we worked, finally settling at the end of the day on the shiny wooden floor, and a damp, muggy scent clung to us from the vapour pumped into the mill, along with a tang of oil which we used to anoint the frames at leaving time.

I considered what Anne had said about talking to Mr Armstrong.

Cissy would tell us we should talk to the union. My older sister was still a mill girl at Gibraltar Mill, but she volunteered at the Weaver’s Association office and spent a lot of time trying to get women to join the union, as well as rallying about industrial disputes. But not all

the women here were members.

I couldn't help but think how badly Mr Armstrong would respond to a deputation. He was always threatening to let us go, even for the slightest reason. But on the other hand, when we had asked the union for advice, they had dismissed what we said, only seeming to bother with men's concerns.

Not only that, but Cissy had left Moor Mill herself after she realised the management didn't recognise the union here and refused to meet with them. Anne seemed to have decided we would have to take things into our own hands. But that was easier said than done, especially when we knew we needed our jobs or else our families wouldn't eat.

The end of the day rolled around, as it always did, no matter how far away it felt by mid-morning. The bell rang and the frames stopped. It was six o'clock. I stretched my back, feeling stiff, and bowed.

Anne made a beeline for Mary and Connie. I realised that even if I didn't go with them to the manager's office, I would still have to wait for Mary as we always walked home together. I didn't know what to do. Part of me felt I should get involved. I knew the issue was important and we deserved better, but I wasn't sure I could do it. I just wanted to go home.

Mary, Anne, and Connie were standing together near the corridor which led to the manager's office.

Mary hurried over. 'Alice, are you coming? He might listen if you're with us. You know he thinks you're one of the sensible ones.'

'Don't you think it'd be better if we went to the union?' I said. 'We could go there now. Together.' I tried to sound firm, as if I felt sure about the idea myself. Which I wasn't, but I thought it was better than facing the beast alone.

'Come on, Mary!' Anne shouted.

Mary linked my arm and led me across the room. 'You know the managers don't listen to the union here, Alice,' said Mary. 'There's no point.'

'I know. But we should at least give them a try. Things change. And if they don't know what's going on, they can't help, can they?' I felt as if I was not only reasoning with them but trying to justify what I was saying to myself as well.

'Alice thinks we should go to the union,' Mary said once we reached Anne and Connie.

'It won't work. And if it did, they would take weeks getting anything done about it. We need the lavatory fixed now. We've got a better chance if we talk to Mr Armstrong ourselves,' said Anne.

'But what about our jobs?' I asked. 'I can't risk being let go.' I looked at Mary when I said this. She knew more than anyone how important this job was to my family.

All the other women had gone home. Many of them had no choice but to go and pick up the child they had left with a relative, praying for the day they were old enough to go to school. The work didn't finish when the bell rang. They couldn't stop and think about what was happening here and if it was right.

Anne linked arms with Mary and Connie.

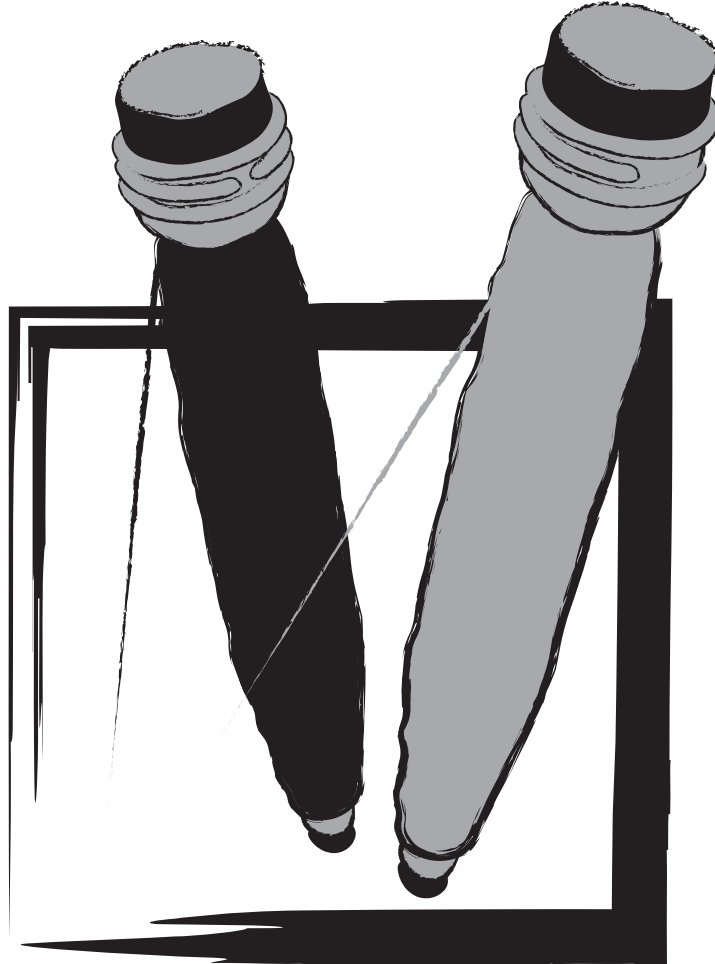
Mary looked over at me questioningly. 'Are you coming?'

'No. I'll stay here and wait,' I said. As soon as the words came out of my mouth I wondered if they felt right. Is that what I wanted to do? Yes. It was the responsible decision. Father had just come back from another flit, Mother was taking in more laundry than she could manage, and I didn't want to look for another job. I'd end up with something more dangerous, noisy, and dirty than the winding room. I'd rather be here than in the weaving shed. The incessant clash and roar of the looms had sent me almost mad during the short time I'd been there.

Mary, Anne, and Connie turned and walked down the corridor to Mr Armstrong's office.

I was alone. I picked at a loose thread in my shawl, thinking I would need to repair it, remembering Cissy showing me how to do it when I was younger. Cissy wouldn't hesitate to stand up for what she believed in. She was like a frenzied cat, not letting things go. Never mind the consequences.

Before I could think too much about it, I found myself running after them.



The manager's office was down the same dim, cheerless corridor as the lavatory. The walls would have once been white but were now blotched with damp, making the surface look like the moon.

I hurried to catch up with them, my clogs clattering on the floor as I ran. The three women stood outside Mr Armstrong's closed door, its black paint beginning to peel in places, and I wanted to pull a tendril to see if it would come off like a ribbon.

'Alice,' said Mary, beaming. 'You've come with us.' She sounded surprised.

They huddled together in front of the office, their shoulders next to each other as if they were forming a barrier. I stood behind them. Anne leaned forward to tap on the door.

I began to wish I had stayed in the workroom, or further down the corridor so I could just listen to what they said.

There was movement on the handle. Anne's back tensed in front of me, and then the door opened.

Mr Armstrong stood in the doorway. He was a large man, almost filling the space with his physicality.

'Well, well, well. What do we have here? Is it a mothers' meeting I haven't heard

about?’ Mr Armstrong scoffed, his yellow teeth protruding over his lip with a blast of air. He looked stern, with eyes the colour of rain-slicked cobbles shadowed by wrinkled lids. He brought a pipe up to his downturned mouth and took a deep inhale which rattled in his chest.

The leathery scent of the smoke made me want to cough. I swallowed it down.

He put one hand on the top of the door, looming towards us. ‘Go on, spit it out,’ he said, raising the other arm to stroke his oily brown hair which was combed back from his face. I thought his hairstyle wasn’t a flattering choice for a man with ears as big as his; there were sprouts of curly hair coming out of them. I had to look away.

‘Erm ... well ... we just wanted to ...’ Anne stuttered. Her body seemed to cower away from him as he leaned forward. She was more used to dealing with Jim. Mary moved her weight from one foot to the other, her face becoming almost as red as her hair. Connie shuffled her feet and looked at the floor.

‘Come on,’ Mr Armstrong tutted. ‘I’m a busy man. I haven’t got all day. Some of us want to go home, you know. There will be a nice steak pie on the table going cold.’ He smirked at this, knowing none of us could afford such luxury for a midweek meal.

Anne turned her head to Mary, but she stepped to the side, edging away, leaving me exposed to Mr Armstrong’s glare. Anne fixed her wide eyes on mine.

I felt my heart fluttering like a bird trapped in a chimney. *What should I say? Should I run away? Make excuses?* I felt suddenly angry at how difficult it was for us to complain about something not being right. We were helpless. I had to try and do something.

‘We need to talk to you about the lavatory,’ I found myself saying. I was conscious to keep my head down, not wanting to appear too forthright and agitate him unnecessarily. I began to worry that I was going to get a reputation as one of *those* women. Like Cissy. The ones who tried to change things. People didn’t like it.

‘And what about it? Is it not up to Miss Foley’s standard, perhaps?’

I paused, not knowing what to say. I wished I hadn’t come. There were beads of sweat blooming in my hairline. I could feel Mary, Anne, and Connie pushed up beside me. I thought they were brave coming to speak to him. Not like me. I liked to blend in. But not today. I wanted to laugh at the thought of telling Cissy when I got home.

‘There are cockroaches in there. It’s overflowing again. We can’t use it,’ I said, trying to straighten my back and hold my head up a little to see Mr Armstrong’s face. I thought the best thing to do was to tell him the truth in as plain a way as possible. And I felt surprisingly exhilarated.

There was no going back now.

‘Well, maybe you should keep the place cleaner,’ he laughed. ‘We’re not going to pay someone to clean up after you. Maybe one of you lot brought the cockroaches in. Perhaps standards are slipping, eh?’

‘I don’t think that’s the case. It’s been overflowing on and off for weeks. We were thinking of speaking to the union.’ I knew it would go nowhere with him, but it was the only threat I felt I could offer.

‘Listen to me, young lady. I don’t care what you think. You’re all here to work and I haven’t got the time or the inclination to listen to these petty ramblings. If you come to me with this rubbish again, I’ll send you straight home and there’ll be another girl in your place by morning. Don’t you forget that. You’ll be asking me for a sofa to sit on next.’

I could feel my hair sticking to my forehead.

Mr Armstrong turned and slammed the door shut behind him, the breeze it created giving me sudden relief. I turned and grabbed Mary’s arm, finding myself laughing.

She pulled me along the corridor, ‘Sssh. He’ll hear you,’ she said, but I couldn’t help it. Anne and Connie ran behind us until we reached the coat hooks.

I pulled my shawl around me, even though I still felt warm. Anne, Mary, and Connie looked at me with astonishment and then we all laughed together.

‘Well, Alice. I never thought I’d see that,’ said Anne.

‘Told you,’ said Mary, giving me a wink. As if she had known all along I was capable of that, when even I didn’t. She linked arms with me, and we went up the steps together.

Once we were outside in the cool air, I began to wonder why I’d done it.

I should have spoken to Cissy first. What was I thinking? But I’d felt so angry at the injustice of it all. Why were we so powerless? They would have a shock if we all walked out like they did at Sunnyside Mill.

But that would never happen here.

Hazel and Evie

Francesca Weekes



It was a sunny afternoon in mid-April, a sluggish sort of day.

Hazel, full of lunch and sleepy, was raking the gravel paths around the main house. This was one of her least favourite jobs. It was repetitive and often made her back ache, but that day the path she was raking ran alongside a border of red and yellow tulips and white pansies, which was one of the best uses of colour she'd seen at Eastman's so far. This was the only border where tulips grew, on the south-facing side of the house where they could bask in sunlight all day long. Hazel loved how the sun shining through the tulip petals made all the colours richer and warmer. She could not choose a favourite colour because she loved the red tulips next to the yellow tulips – all together they looked like a fire or, she imagined, the cocktail dress of a beautiful woman.

Hazel finished raking and straightened up, rolling her neck to hear it click. She hadn't worn gardening gloves and her hands were dusty, so she thought she would go and wash.

If you followed the path back around the house towards the stable block for about a minute, there was a tap on the outside wall of the main garage, and Hazel walked there with the rake in one hand. The gravel crunched under her feet. When she turned on the tap, it screeched painfully and then the water spurted out, running extraordinarily cold as if the tank were drawing its water from some icy winter spring. It felt so good on her forearms that

she cupped her hand and put it on the back of her neck and splashed some on her face.

For a few minutes, she stood completely still there, just resting, probably a little longer than she should have done. Then, just as the feeling of cold water trickling down her spine was beginning to feel uncomfortable instead of pleasant, someone behind her said sharply, 'Hazel Foster, isn't it?'

Hazel whipped around, her ankle clanging painfully into the rake which she had left leaning against the garage wall.

The speaker was Miss Radley, who Hazel had not been able to help but think of as 'Evie' ever since Henry had told her about the family who owned Eastman's. Though Evie was standing several feet away from Hazel, it felt closer because of the way the corner of the garage building cut them off from the rest of the house, so that no one peering out of a window or sitting on the terrace would be able to watch their encounter.

Hazel was alone, with Evie before her. Evie was wearing a white linen shirt and a pale skirt in a colour that was difficult to pick out in the shade. Beige or perhaps a light blue. The sleeves of the shirt were rolled halfway up Evie's forearms, which gave her a careless look as if she couldn't be bothered with buttoning her sleeves at the wrist. Her hair was short, cut close behind her ears, and very dark. Hazel had never seen anyone with hair that dark. She was taller than Hazel by nearly a head.

'Yes, miss. Sorry, I was just –' Hazel didn't know how she was going to finish that sentence, so she was almost glad when Evie interrupted her.

'Just taking a moment? You've been standing here for nearly five minutes. I've been watching you.'

Hazel tucked her hair compulsively behind her ears; sweat prickled at her temples and under her arms. She wondered if Evie could smell it, the same way she had caught a faint citrusy scent coming from Evie when she turned around. 'I'm sorry, miss,' she said, and offered, 'It's a hot day and I just finished a job, so I thought I'd cool down a bit.'

'I don't require an explanation, Foster,' Evie said crisply, but her eyelids seemed to tremble as if she was struggling to hold Hazel's gaze.

Hazel quickly looked down and clasped her hands behind her back. Her face was flushing very hot, with anger and fear at the same time. Surely Evie didn't have the power to fire her, or even to make someone else fire her? Surely this wasn't a fireable offence?

But when Hazel looked up again, Evie's expression had changed. Her eyes looked carefully blank instead of coldly furious. Evie held out the half-smoked cigarette, proffered between two fingers. 'Want some?'

Now she sounded overly languid. It felt like Hazel was being challenged to some kind of game where Evie held all the cards and Hazel none. Or perhaps it was a test she was supposed to pass. Already the way they were relating to each other, as mistress and servant, seemed to be fluid, wavering, as if seen through water. She wasn't sure where she stood with Evie anymore, whether she would be punished or rewarded for breaking the rules.

Hazel looked at the cigarette trailing smoke and shook her head.

'You don't smoke?' Evie asked. She tilted her head and took a drag. Even the way she tapped the ash from her cigarette was elegant: her index finger, which wore a slim silver ring, patted the top of the cigarette with just enough force to dislodge the ash. All of her movements were surprisingly economical, as if she were determined to waste as little energy as possible, and this made her seem utterly unselfconscious to the point of insouciance. But the way she kept her eyes on Hazel's face, unblinkingly, made Hazel think that she was right and it must be some kind of test.

'I do smoke sometimes, Miss,' she replied. 'But only with the other servants. I'm not sure it would be appropriate now.' She made sure to keep her tone neutrally respectful so that

nothing offensive could be gleaned from it, and smiled politely.

Accordingly, Evie's eyebrows pinched together slightly, but after a moment she inclined her head. 'Well, you certainly have an idea of what's correct,' she said. 'Though, that doesn't include splashing under a tap in broad daylight.'

Hazel held her peace, but the nails of one hand were digging into the palm of the other.

Seemingly satisfied, Evie flicked her cigarette onto the ground before Hazel's feet and walked away.

Hazel released her hands from their tight grip on each other. Blood was rushing around her head and her breathing was coming fast, like she'd just run very hard or carried something heavy. She picked up her tool box and started to stride away, then as an afterthought, making sure that Evie was really gone, she veered back and ground Evie's cigarette end into the gravel with the heel of her boot. She kept doing this until there was no possibility that the cigarette could be alight, almost until the idea of its even being a cigarette had disappeared. Then she used the tip of her boot to push some gravel over it.

All at once she felt deflated. Since seeing Evie at the edge of the woods, she had often found herself imagining how their first meeting would occur, especially at night just before going to sleep, but she had always thought she would be prepared for it, that she would be in the middle of doing something that reflected well on her. Instead she had been caught off guard, and now she had made a bad first impression. Perhaps Evie would talk about it to her parents and they would start watching out for her, the troublesome female gardener, waiting for her to trip up.

* * *

Later that afternoon she told Henry about the encounter. He had finished his tasks for the day and was helping her gather herbs in the walled garden.

The day had cooled, the sun was shy behind rosy clouds, and Hazel was wearing an old jacket of her father's over her shirt. 'It was a disaster,' she told Henry. 'I found her really confusing. It felt like she hated me for no reason, but I suppose I was breaking the rules.' She looked up at Henry and made a mock-mournful face, though speaking about it made her feel like she was actually going to cry.

Henry nodded thoughtfully. He shifted and brushed his hands together. Hazel smelt thyme and rosemary, and imagined the scents, dislodged by Henry's movements, floating upwards towards her face. She knew that his silence meant he was thinking about what to say. He wasn't like her, he didn't worry about what people were going to think of what he said, but he always measured his words regardless.

He cleared his throat and said, 'I've been working here since I left school, so Miss Evie and I grew up together, more or less.'

Hazel felt a pang of envy, even though she knew that Henry's experience of countryside life would not have been idyllic.

'It's always been tricky to tell what's going on in her head,' Henry continued. 'She doesn't want people getting to know her, right enough. I used to think we were friends, but you can't really be friends with the family.'

Hazel nodded. This news didn't surprise her.

'She's probably bored,' Henry added. 'I would be if I didn't have a job to keep me busy.'

Hazel made a *huh* noise of realisation. She hadn't thought about that. 'I don't think you'd go around terrorising the servants, though,' she said, grinning.

Henry laughed and shook his head. 'No, work for me,' he said.

'And me,' Hazel chimed in automatically, but she was still thinking about Evie, where she would be now; probably taking afternoon tea with her mother, or lounging on a sofa, reading.

Spider Light

By Cheryl Kilvington

It is almost anonymous:
my father's domain viewed
from a satellite

in outer space. On screen,
there is a fenced-in green cell
with a glasshouse oddly

adrift on the lawn.
It could be June: somewhere he is
present in this photograph,

invisibly at work
on his nodding tomatoes,
or attending melancholy

cucumbers: engaged
and ever vigilant in the pointless
fight against

red spider mites
while The Cordettes played
on eternal repeat.

I was his bored
subordinate; trapped
inside this scene for all

my growing-up years.
When Ziggy Stardust fell to earth
I was not even tuned-in.

Instead, my weeks
were lost to unknotting hoses,
or tweezing out

surplus seedlings
under the command of a
self-appointed head

gardener-in-chief
who wielded his horticultural

powers like a minor god.

In this room filled with
fretted light, his hands are still
against the white sheet: clean,

alien and embarrassing. I sit
with his shape for hours; our days
are leached of all colour.

As I watch him sleep,
unseeable spiders tread soft grey
webs across his mind;

undetected by the clinician's
monitor is the flourishing
sense of his absence.



Build Her With Green

Louisa Ashton

It was early spring when I found Robin.

I was cycling to Owler Bar, a village perched on the southernmost tip of the Peak District. It was more a scouting mission than a scientific field trip, as my information on the village was unclear. There were rumours concerning the people there, something about a communal symbiosis with a cluster of cacti on the village green, but not much more. With an early morning start, I could cycle there, assess my initial interest, and return home before dark.

Travelling from the west, I planned my route so that I could stop mid-morning and rest at a small town called Grindlow. The local campsite still had running water the last time I stopped by, so it seemed like a good idea. Taking the narrow lanes, I passed a small number of greystone cottages with their gardens running alongside the road. That's where I first noticed the top of her head, motionless, just visible over a dry stone wall. I cycled past, slowly, watching for movement. It was strange to see her there. Most children were asleep at this time of day.

I stopped by the cottage front. The lawn was long outside the small house, overgrown with wild grasses and white puffs of dandelion seed heads. A lawn gone wild was a sign, like hanging a note on the front door saying: 'Gone to lunch, indefinitely.'

I pushed open the side gate to the garden and despite the creak of the hinges, the girl remained unflinching, standing in the middle of the lawn with her back to me.

It was quiet. Perhaps her parents and neighbours had succumbed to one of the earlier waves and she was left here, alone. It could happen like that. Later that day, when I took a moment to walk the rooms of the cottage, my suspicions would be confirmed. I had become quite good at reading the debris left behind.

I watched the girl, small legs in long grass, swaying ever so gently. In front of her grew a silver birch, standing far higher than the neighbouring hawthorn. Full and thick with new leaves, the birch's shadow laid itself like cloth across the lawn, reaching over the girl and around her, making her seem as tiny as a six-year-old, but there was something in the calm and slow restraint of her sway that made me think she was more like eight or nine. Behind her was a small, freshly dug mound of soil. A hand trowel lay discarded beside it. That's when I became fully aware of the soil stains along the hem of the girl's dress.

After a short while, she raised her arms and began reaching out, finger tips searching and probing the air. Both of her hands glistened a thick vermilion red. I thought maybe she'd been painting, but later I found the remains of a large cat in the kitchen sink.

Gradually, slowly, her head raised towards the leaf-dripping fingers of the silver birch. Her own hands began to droop from her wrists and swayed with her breath, matching the gentle stir of the birch's hanging branches. I realised that this was not a game. She was not playing 'tree'. She was studying. Practising.

The lilacs were in full bloom, waving over the dead stems of headless bluebells.

Thrusting through the overgrown lawn were the yellow-almost-orange faces of dandelions, and in the shade of the silver birch stood Robin, swaying alone, dripping crimson meat amongst the green. And this might have been it. This might have been the moment I decided I would turn Robin into a plant.

* * *

Where did you go? asked Fortuna.

Good question.

I don't know, I replied.

Six months on from when I found Robin, we were visiting Fortuna Gold and her carnivorous *Nepenthes* plant. The enormous woman had sat there, apparently, watching me as I stood at her window, staring vacantly through broken venetian blinds for about an hour and a half. I wet myself. I was so embarrassed when I realised, but Fortuna barely acknowledged it and pointed to a pile of clothing by the back door. There were trousers and T-shirts of different sizes, but it was curious how most of it was clearly too small for her. Perhaps she kept them there for other guests who might lose control of their bodies. I found a pair of jeans and decided not to ask.

Robin had been sitting beside her at the kitchen table, watching silently. Even though the child was no stranger to the slow nightmarish experience of the failing human body, I wish she hadn't seen me like that: dead-eyed, open-mouthed, urine soaking through the canvas of my trainers.

I wonder where we go when that happens, Fortuna mused. When we get staring like that.

I never remember, I replied.

Strange how the mind reaches for the night, isn't it? she said.

We said no more about it. We knew what was coming for us. We'd seen it sliding past us as a first wave, then a second, then a third for those who were quick to feel the pull. Yet, for those of us who remained, we could now enjoy a longer sustained descent. Pieces of us falling away so slowly you could barely see it.

Do you remember when you could go to a shop and see a wall of tea? she asked. Tons of tea bags in little square boxes.

I do, I said.

Yeah, she said. I miss Earl Grey. Nectar of the gods.

No more gods though, I thought. Not even the self-made kind. We had all thought we were an ocean, unlimited tides, an unstoppable flow. In reality, we were ponds. Small and unbearably still. Mud-pits that grew smaller and smaller.

Good thing I brought you some bergamot too then, I said.

You did? Fortuna said, twisting her large neck round to look at me. You grow yourself? Is it good? The proper stuff?

It's incredible, I said. Let's just say, I know a thing or two about what makes a plant sing.

Shame you can't grow something to help the mind. You know, hold us back from the darkness, she said.

I stayed quiet, and Robin looked at me with something between curiosity and accusation. She had remained mute from the day I found her in that garden in Grindlow, but I could tell she was a sharp and curious child. Apart from elevated levels of lethargy in the daytime, she was yet to start showing signs of mental deterioration. As for me, I'm aware I have only a slim window of time to complete her procedure before I can barely speak or

remember my own name. Perhaps two years, maybe less. There are signs already. There are long periods of the day I can't account for. And there are moments when other, older memories break the surface, buoyant and bright.

When the old memories come, it's my time working in the Living Monument department of Illyrium Genetics that appears before me, whole and full of colour. I can lean in and hold my hands out to the calm grey walls and white-veined Formica worktops where I would splice genes for pennies. I can smell the dry air-scrubbed lab: a hanging dead smell. Occasionally, a few other scents drift through before they're sucked through the automated purification system. Chemical lemon floor cleaner. The vanilla of my unauthorised hand cream. A trace of caustic blueberry as my colleague across the bench from me brazenly unscrews the top of his hip flask. Homemade vodka, he says.

I see the words 'Let them live. Let them grow.' in ochre on grey, painted large on the walls above us. My time at Illyrium was back when we were all still part of the ocean, feeling full and immense.

Not many knew back then how significant Illyrium was and the role it would play in very literally changing the face of the earth. Covered in green, they said. Everything will be covered in green. And it is.

* * *

Robin was eager to visit Fortuna. For the first six months after I brought her home with me, I'd taken her on every single field trip. Although she hadn't spoken a word or even uttered a sound to me or anyone else, she was very adept at letting me know what she was thinking.

I would read out a short list of potential candidates for us to visit, all at least within a maximum of two days cycle, and she would choose immediately, stabbing a finger at my list.

It's important to note that at this point, I had not told Robin of my plans for the procedure. I needed more data and a clearer proposal, but I was keen to involve her in gathering genetic samples and finding inspiration for the design.

We have become collectors.

People send us news of the incredible plants they have discovered across the northern landscape and I offer them fresh fruit and vegetables from the greenhouses in exchange for an examination, a few small cuttings, and some soil samples. And it's important for Robin to be there in person. I like to see how she reacts to the plants themselves.

The Hoyland Caravan were eager to pass on Fortuna's message. The hardened community of pedal-powered and horse driven vehicles had diverted its east-west coast route to swing by my place specifically. They told me the locals called her 'the Disappearing Woman', and that she lived in a cottage near the Devil's Elbow in the village of Tintwistle. This was great news. For me and Robin, it was merely a two hour trip east by bike. I paid the Caravan with a selection of salad leaves and herbs from Greenhouse 6 before visiting Greenhouse 3 to inspect my crop of *Camellia sinensis*. The Caravan mentioned that Fortuna liked a cup of tea.

The River Mersey was quiet. No wanderers, as I call them. We saw only two floaters, one speeding past on the current, face down. Robin spotted the other, a tall one, caught in an outcrop of long grass, one arm tangled in the blades as if hanging on. Apart from Gladys, who we saw alive and well, replacing the wooden slats on her floating shed tethered to the iron bridge, we saw no one else by the river.

On reaching Stockport, a city layered in threads of roads and pathways, I kept us close to the ground, moving through tall brick shadows and over the grasses that had learnt to spread thin wire roots over pavements.

Robin always rides in the trailer, sitting beneath the canvas with food and water supplies under one foot and my lab kit under the other. Although she normally sleeps as we cycle, for this journey she sat alert, glaring at me, silently demanding we take the small detour before Fortuna's cottage, to ride the Devil's Elbow.

I didn't mind. It was merely a tightly pinched turn in the sloping road that pulls away from the southern end of Tintwistle. Robin had pointed it out to me again and again after I showed her our route to Fortuna on the map. I told her the local folktale of how the road was thought to be the severed bent arm of the devil, cut from him when he tried to steal a mortal woman. Robin loves these gory stories. I tell her that they serve to caution us. That we are not always free to choose our path and that roads do not belong to us. Built of bodies and bones, they command the rhythm of our route. The bends and the curves.

The tarmacked road was smooth and the grass on either side was long. Robin turned her head to watch it fall away behind us, narrowing her eyes at it. I think she expected more. Just beyond the hairpin bend, we found a Hanger on the branches of a thick trunked oak. We cycled past and watched him spin slowly, pushed lightly by the breeze. Faded gingham triangles fluttered in the branches above his head. He had used bunting.

If Robin was disappointed by the bend in the road, meeting Fortuna only moments later would make up for it.

Fortuna. Full of flesh and folding skin. Whose intimate and nauseating relationship with her *Nepenthes* would stay with me. The care she took, pulling on the singular surgical glove, finger by finger. The small, dull knife, with what looked like a neat carved bone handle, held in her fat hands, her large size having no effect on the precision of her cuts. And the plant was beyond anything I could have imagined. Incredible. And the genetic samples were well worth the journey. I will transcribe the audio tonight.



File name: The Disappearing Woman

Contact name: 'Fortuna Gold'

Origin Plant Genome: *Nepenthes alata*

Mutation keywords: Extended growth, accelerated digestion, increased root diameter

Full Audio length: 1:22:23

Erica: Okay.

[movement]

Fortuna: Your girl okay over there?

Erica: Yes, she's just sleeping. She'll sleep for some hours yet.

Fortuna: Yeah, of course, they do now don't they?

Erica: But she's better than most. Awake longer in the day, nine hours sometimes.

Fortuna: Yeah. You want tea?

Erica: You have tea?

Fortuna: Yeah, someone leaves me teabags on the window. I wake up. I have a shit. I shower. I go to the window and there's a bag, a few bags or, yeah, a box. Once there was a whole tea caddy, those old ones you know? A box with different compartments and different teas in each one.

Erica: Who leaves them there?

Fortuna: Dunno. Probably an admirer.

Erica: Do you have [pause] admirers?

Fortuna: You saying I shouldn't?

Erica: No, no of course not. I'm just curious. I've never had an admirer.

[pause]

Fortuna: Never?

Erica: If you have enough tea, I'll have one, erm thanks.

Fortuna: Sure. Share the wealth. [movement] I like to call them my audience.

[pause]

Erica: The – who? Erm. Your admirers?

Fortuna: Yeah. Some of them are in love with me. Some get aroused. Some are just fascinated like this all means something or I'm trying to say something big, you know?

Erica: Are you?

[sounds of tea making]

Fortuna: they crave extremity, yeah, something grotesque. Full of pain, relentless, certain, something extraordinary, and extraordinary must mean something, right?

Erica: Does it?

Fortuna: You haven't told your recorder what I do yet.

Erica: Yes, I know, erm, we'll get there.

Fortuna: Better do it now no? You'll forget.

Erica: I have a plan, it's planned out, it's okay. I'll do my thing and you don't need to worry about me.

Fortuna: [... inaudible ...] – mmmmm. [pause] Do you want to see? I haven't done it today. Saved it for you. Do you know people pay me to watch?

Erica: Yes, that's how I found you. Carlton, from the Caravan, said he came to see you, erm, he was very enthusiastic. Passed on your details. [pause] Errr yes, if you've waited to show me, I'll watch. Then I can get a sample afterwards, when it's. Digesting.

Fortuna: Sounds alright. And it won't be damaged?

Erica: No. I'm careful.

Fortuna: Okay. Come. In here. [pause] Audience sits there. [pause] Back in a sec.

[movement]

[silence 1 min 46 secs]

[movement]

[silence 10 secs]

Erica: It's

Fortuna: Big.

Erica: Not as big as I thought perhaps though. Yes. A *Nepenthes rafflesiana*. Or maybe an *alata*. Oh, do you [pause] want me to leave if you want to change?

Fortuna: No, I just like to wear something that won't stain, yeah. Sometimes the

bleeding takes a while to stem. Some audience tip big when it's messy.

[movement]

Erica: That's.

[movement]

I heard you used to film yourself when you started, but, not, you don't do it anymore now?

Fortuna: Electrics are too shit. Some people got it, some don't so, yeah. It's good here still but most people don't have it enough so they couldn't watch it at home themselves, you know? Traded the camera. Got some tinned peaches.

Erica: Can I sit a bit closer?

Fortuna: No.

Erica: That's. That's a. That knife looks blunt.

[movement]

Erica: What is it? A steak knife?

Fortuna: Dunno. Maybe a cheese knife I think. Remember cheese? Some can get it. Where you from again? By where that council estate was, right? The huge one? Before they bulldozed it to build ... whatever it is. You got cheese near there, I heard. It's when the cheese has gone that you know it's over, you know? Yeah. When it's gone from the North, it's over. So you should get to the farmers before they forget how to do the cheese. Don't give a shit for milk or butter or the meat, you know? Fuck burgers. Fuck milk. It's the cheese. Real cheese.

[pause]

Let's do the elbow. There's a bit of a lip I think I can reach and get into.

Erica: How. How much have you [pause] fed [pause] into it so far?

Fortuna: What you can see. Left foot. Right ear. Some scalp. I've worked into the left arm a lot. I joke with regulars that I want nothing left of me by the end but my clit. My clit and my right arm, obviously, to finish the job. A right arm and a clit. [laughing]

Erica: Would you ever consider employing someone to continue if you're [pause] unable to do it yourself?

Fortuna: No.

[movement]

Erica: Wow. I'm surprised it's not. All. Infected.

Fortuna: I'm careful.

[sound of rubber glove]

I'm starting.

[pause]

Erica: Is that.

[pause 20 secs]

[deep breathing]

[pause 25 secs]

[deep breathing]

[pause 1 min 10 secs]

Are you okay?

[pause 10 secs]

Fortuna?

[pause 15 secs]

Can you hear me?

[pause 20 secs]

[sniffs]

[silence 20 secs]

You did it.

[sniffs]

[pause 1 min 35 secs]

Fortuna: You didn't vomit. Good sign.

Erica: Can I see the plant?

Fortuna: Sure, I need to sterilise, so yeah. Have a blast.

Erica: Okay.

After

By Francesca Weekes

It's hard for us to remember
now, Mike and I,
how long the dust has been crawling
across the sun's eye,

but something – the water we don't
drink, the exhaust fumes
perhaps – has dried up all recall.
Maybe we had a home

where nothing left us; now people,
leaves, trash ribbons flee our car.
Even the tarmac cracks away
in strangely neat slabs and bars.

We had a group – young, like us,
one girl with pink threads through
her hair. But they rode away with
slumped heads, and we never drew

alongside. Yesterday Mike asked
if I thought her bright
hair faded. *Certainly there's no-
where now to get the dye,*

I said. These are the sort of things
we talk about. We
worry for the people we knew
if they have enough to eat

If they're keeping warm at night.
If there's fresh coffee in
their battered thermos on the dash
wobbling at wheel spins

its taste biting like the wind.
Once we met a cat, fierce
and ginger like a lion. We
had stopped outside this

house, the one at Eddy's Grove, if
you know it. Spiders

scratched on the floor. We opened
the curtains wider

and an orange blur climbed the shelves.
We tried to coax him down
but he ran through our fingers
like a ghost in a ghost town.

I hope we didn't scare him away
forever. We left that same
evening, just as sunset climbed
the awesome frame

of the sky, first orange, then pink.
Don't you wish
we'd a cat, Mike said, and the road
hummed under the truck, *I wish...*

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Extract from *Build Her with Green*

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FICTION: 'Fiddler's Bow'

CHERELLE FINDLEY writes fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and her essays on identity have featured in *gal-dem*, *Bad Form Review* and *LAPPtheBrand*. 'PLUTO' is an extract from her current project, a novel about two women dealing with loss in the digital age, where the line between the public and the private is becoming unclear.

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FICTION: Extract from *PLUTO*

TOM GUY is a writer from Worcestershire. His short stories have appeared in publications such as *Bandit Fiction* and *Between These Shores*, amongst others. His piece in this anthology is a personal essay, which gives a flavour of what to expect from *Unbuttoned*, his memoir on bisexuality.

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NON-FICTION: Extract from *Unbuttoned*

MADELINE HOFFMAN is an American poet, editor, and aspiring novelist currently working on a dual-narrative retelling of a lost Sophoclean play. She is also writing her first collection of poetry, which deals with family, identity, and genetics. Originally from Kansas City, Madeline now lives in South London.

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POEMS: 'Response to "The Distance I Can Be from my Son"'

'February in London'

'Trash Talk'

FICTION: Extract from *Eriphyle*

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POEMS: 'Your Guide to Self-Organisation'

'Phanerite'

‘Spider Light’

THOMAS MARTIN is a novelist with a BA in Linguistics and Sociology from the University of Manchester. His piece in this anthology is part of a gay romance novel called *Half Awake*, which explores his **youth** in this semi-autobiographical account of family, first love, and belonging.

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FICTION: Extract from *Half Awake*

HELEN MAYALL works at Bolton Library and Museum. She has been shortlisted for the Bolton Octagon Theatre, Earlyworks Press, and Henshaw Press short story competitions as **well** as being published in *Hearth and Coffin Literary Journal*. Helen is **currently** writing her first historical fiction novel, *The Secret of Good Work*.

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FICTION: Extract from *The Secret of Good Work*

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FICTION: ‘Instead’

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FICTION: Extract from *The Night Nurse*

DIPIKA MUMMERY is a content editor and copywriter living in Manchester. Her short **fiction** **has** been published in **print** and online by Comma Press, Arachne Press, **Tasavvur**, Fox & Windmill, and Fly on the Wall Press. Her **piece** in this anthology is from her novel-in-progress, *This Burning World*.

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FICTION: Extract from *This Burning World*

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POETRY: ‘Cannibal’

‘Found Wanting’

‘Heliotrope’

‘Here’s You’

‘Notes’

SHEKINA ROSE is a writer and marketing consultant from West Yorkshire. Her poetry has been published in *Present Tense Lit Mag*, and her **short** stories in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *The Write-In* and *Sequoia Speaks*. Her piece *Sex, lies and slugs* is from her work-in-progress autofiction

book, *Shaping the Girl*.

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AUTOFICTION: 'Sex, Lies, and Slugs' from *Shaping the Girl*

FRANCESCA WEEKES read English at Cambridge. Her poetry has been published in *Allegro Poetry Magazine*, *BAIT*, and the *Jane Martin Poetry Prize Anthology*. Her contributions to this anthology are some poems and an excerpt from a queer historical novel about gardening. She likes skateboarding and embedded narratives.

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POEMS: 'What is there to write about except teenage longing?'

'After'

'To'

FICTION: Extract from *Hazel and Evie*

DANIEL WHELAN was a breathtakingly unsuccessful actor before he realised he was better at making up the words than saying them. He has written for the stage, including an adaptation of Richard Adams' *Watership Down*. His children's novel, *The Box of Demons*, won the Write Now! Prize. He is from North Wales.

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FICTION: 'Stop the Clocks' from *The Gods of Gwynfa Road*

JOSHUA WICKS, having completed his MA History at the University of Edinburgh – which is Scottish for a BA – and after a year of pandemic working, decided it was high time to pursue his passion of fiction writing. You will find part of his in-development, untitled novel in this anthology.

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FICTION: 'Lydia', novel extract

CHARLIE J. WRIGG has a BA in English Literature from the University of Exeter. They developed a love of all things fantastical at a young age and have a particular interest in obscure folktales, both old and new, real or feigned, because hey, you never know!

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FICTION: 'Idolatry'

'Limerence'

'Old Wounds'

Credits

The Manchester Anthology is published annually by the Centre for New Writing. Every aspect of the book is conceived and produced by the graduating year of the MA Creative Writing at the University of Manchester. Students are given a budget to manage and, as well as contributing writing to the anthology, they are involved in all the key creative and logistical decisions from editorial to event planning; design concepts to corrections; paper stock to publicity.

This tenth edition of the Manchester Anthology was brought to you by:

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